

STAR TREK
“Both Hands Full”
by
John Erik Ege

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EPH

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Author contact info:

John Erik Ege

214-907-4070

Email

solarchariot@hotmail.com

This story is the third in the series. Book One: “A Touch of Greatness. Book Two: “Another Piece of the Action.” Fourth Book coming soon. Still waiting on word from Simon and Schuster. Don’t understand the process, but literary agent and S&S seem to be in dialogue.

PROLOGUE

Lt. Kevin Alber's hands were shaking as he tried to boost the gain on the subspace communication. He had anticipated the signal being jammed and so he had hidden a number of relays through out the the nebula just in case the "worse case scenario" happened. And it was happening even as he tried to get Admiral Eric Pressman on the line. Just getting the Admiral on the line was problematic enough. Because Alber's assignment was top secret, even if the Admiral was in his office taking calls, he might not be able to respond. Fortunately the Admiral was available, but he sounded distant, his voice hollow. Admiral Eric Pressman's face was distorted, not from static, but from the waxing and waning of the digital signal which caused blocks of pixels to freeze or fade out completely before new information swept in to refresh it. The Klingon's must have been jamming a wider area than usual, perhaps anticipating that Alber would have hidden relays in order to circumvent their jamming a signal. Which also meant that they knew that he knew that they were onto him.

"They're moving everyone out now," Lt. Kevin Alber said. "I'm not sure where they're taking us, but we're going to lose this project." Alber was afraid of more than just loosing the project. He was certain he and the other black-ops' engineers were likely to lose their lives so that the Klingons could maintain the secret and the technology to themselves. And since the present Engineers and Admiral Pressman were the only ones in Fleet that knew about this particular project, it was unlikely anyone would be missed and Pressman would be unable to complain, even to the Klingon's who he had made the deal with. Alber had known the risks when he had signed on for the joint venture and had figured some of the counter measures he had taken would detour the "worse case scenario." He was wrong.

The project was a simple one. Under the command of Admiral Pressman and his counter part in the Klingon Empire, an Admiral Sheaar, the two would design a new class of starship. It would be the first Klingon Federation hybrid ship, at least, that Alber was aware of, combining some of the best technology the Federation and the Klingon Empire had available. It was Pressman's idea to legally circumvent the restrictions placed on the Federation by the Romulan Federation treaty, a treaty that prevented the Federation from developing their own cloaking devices for ships. Since the Klingon's already had cloaking devices and they were not a member of the Federation when the Treaty between the Federation and the Romulans had gone into affect, there was no restriction on the Klingon's use and development of cloaking technology. The Romulans had no doubt believed the Klingon Empire's days were numbered, and, consequently, were not impressed with Klingon research and development or there would have been greater emphasis on the restriction of Klingon technology. Considering the peace between the two empires was tenuous at best, it was also likely the Romulans had simply chosen to risk the Klingon's improving their technology. The Romulans had stolen technology from the Klingons in the past, so they could do so again if need be.

Truth be known, the Klingon's research and development had slowed to a veritable crawl, and judging by the ships and the uniforms on the Klingons that crewed them, the Klingons were nothing more than a rag tag fleet, a mere shadow of the formidable enemy they once were during the Klingon Romulan War. Admiral Pressman believed this to be true, at least, and apparently, so did Admiral Sheaar, or the two wouldn't have made the agreements they had made, all clandestine in nature. Alber knew

the Romulans would have been concerned about the Federation “borrowing” Klingon technology, but the reverse, the Klingon’s “appropriating” Federation technology wouldn’t have been seen as troubling. And that was what Pressman wanted to exploit, for, as Pressman was always so willing to point out, even though the Romulans were a paranoid lot, the Romulans relied too heavily on the Federation always following through on their agreements.

“Should I set the self-destruct sequence?” Alber asked

“Are you crazy?” Pressman asked. “And lose all the valuable time and effort we put into this research?”

Alber wasn’t blind to the fact that he was expendable in Pressman’s eyes, but he was still hopeful that Pressman had a solution to his present crisis. After all, finding and soliciting the kind of allegiance Alber was providing was a bit risky to one’s career. It was in Pressman’s best interest to protect him.

“Did you install the equipment I sent you?” Pressman asked.

“I installed it per your instructions,” Alber said. “But not knowing what it is or how it works, I don’t see the relevance. It’s not hooked to anything important and it doesn’t seem to be a self-destruct device, but then again, it’s impervious to scans...”

“Activate the security protocol routine I gave you,” Pressman said.

Alber nodded and removed what appeared to be a gold coin from his pocket. He set this down, heads up, on the computer terminal in front of him. Its proximity triggered something in the console. The coin self-illuminated. Command pathways began to appear on several of the monitors, branching off, forcing each page to scroll. The instructions and codes flew by so fast that Alber couldn’t make them out. Pressman’s image disappeared.

Behind Alber, beyond his sight, a cube illuminated. He had never noticed it before, as it blended in perfectly with the ceiling protrusions in Auxiliary Control. Further, it was likely no one had ever noticed the cube before, minus the person who had installed it, blindly following the blue prints and accompanied instructions. Now it had his full attention and he racked his brain trying to remember where he had seen it, or anything similar before. Something from a history lesson, it seemed. The cube produced a strange pattern of lights, causing his shadow on the terminal interface to shift and fade. He turned and looked up at the cube and the psychedelic swirling of colors that filled the box like a soothing night light.

A female appeared before him. She appeared as a point, grew into a line, grew into a two dimensional image of a female, and then filled out into three dimensions as if she had been a picture of a person that had suddenly inflated. It happened so fast that he barely registered the “phase in” part of her manifestation, but it happened sufficiently slow that his mind had interpreted her sudden materialization to mean she was a hologram, not a living person.

“State your name and purpose,” she said.

“Captain Alber,” he answered.

“What’s the password?” the hologram asked.

“Um, I don’t know,” Alber stammered. Maybe she meant his personal computer access code. “Cherry Apple Red.”

“Captain Alber,” she said.

Alber relaxed a little. He had to suppress some stray thoughts. She was, no doubt, one of the best looking holograms he had ever seen, reminding him of a Garcia holo-novel, but his situation was dire and so he couldn't allow his mind to go off on such a tangent as entertainment. He needed to lock down the ship and incapacitate the Klingons who were attempting to steal everything he had worked so hard on. "Are you the new security system that Pressman was telling me about?"

"Captain Alber," she said, softer, stepping forward. "I am for you."

He was confused by her statement and again his mind went towards his idea of entertainment. The fact that she claimed to be for "him," as if Pressman had sent him a present, something to help him through the lonely nights of this mission, was rather a pleasant thought. He actually thought he was going to have to thank the Admiral. She reached out and touched him on the chest, just below the left shoulder, palm flat against him.

Captain George Alber screamed. The pain that exploded through his chest was beyond anything he had ever experienced in his life. Worse than even the Cardassian torture session he had been through about six years ago. The only fortunate thing was that the pain was so great that he passed out before death came upon him.

The woman stepped back, looked up and to the left, accessing the security information for her ship. Her gaze returned forward, she deflated into a two dimensional framework, turned slightly so that only a trace line of her remained, a thin black line. And though the line was visible, a person might easily miss it if you didn't know what you were looking for. That line shrank further, finally becoming a dot no bigger than the tip of an eraser on a pencil, before disappearing completely. The woman appeared and reappeared throughout the ship, disposing of all hostiles on board. In some instances, multiple versions of her appeared.

After her ship was quiet, she turned her attention to the starships outside her station. She determined the quickest way to sabotage them was to over load their warp cores. She killed an engineer and destroyed one of the ships. The other ship fled and she decided to let them go, for they were no longer a threat. Then she turned her attention back to her ship and decided to clean up the mess she had made. After all, it would not do to have the insides of her ship marred by decaying flesh. No, that wouldn't do at all. She would not want her Commanding Officer to find the ship in disarray. No, she would have to clean. And clean she did. There would be no trace of any organics remaining on the ship or in the space station that encapsulated the ship.

CHAPTER ONE

Doctor Selar touched Garcia lightly, waking him. Startled, he grabbed her arm and pulled her off her feet. Selar controlled her fall, landing on top of him, hands either side of his head. Her eyes locked with his and she watched with curiosity the growing recognition on his face as he transitioned from dreams to waking life. He frowned and eased up on her arm and then finally let go. The impression of his grip remained, leaving white marks on her arm from grasping so tight. The white slowly receded, her arm flushing out. Selar didn't protest the injury or the fact that she was pulled onto the couch, practically on top of him. She felt the warmth radiating from him, a heat that came from an unnaturally high metabolism as far as humans were concerned. Selar was wearing the silky gown that she had worn the first night they had participated in Pon Farr rituals. It was like silk, but was a material invented by Vulcans. It was designed to sparkle, fluoresce, and or transition through various level of transparency depending on certain variables. The sparkles caught Garcia's eyes, drawing his eyes away from her eyes for a moment.

"Sorry," Garcia said, returning her gaze.

"For grabbing my arm and drawing me into you or for that look you just gave me?" Doctor Selar asked.

"Both," Garcia said.

"Hiding your feelings for me is not logical," Selar said, and then amended the statement: "For you. What has transpired between us has not been lost."

"Yeah, I'm just unduly influenced by the amount of oxy-tocin flowing through my veins," Garcia said. "And besides, it's not logical for you to wake me up just to discuss my feelings, or am I telepathically projecting to you in my sleep?"

"It was necessary to wake you. You have a Priority One message from Star Fleet Headquarters," Selar said. "Real time, not tape delayed. Would you like privacy?"

"No," Garcia said, not jumping up to respond right away. Though he hated to admit it, he was comforted by Selar's weight on top of him. "Well, I don't think that will be necessary. I've never received a Priority One message."

Doctor Selar repositioned herself to allow Garcia to get up. He pulled on a shirt before activating the viewer in Selar's quarters. Selar remained seated, drawing her feet up on the couch, hands on her knees, while Garcia signaled the viewer with his implant. The Star Fleet screen saver image faded and was replaced by an image of Admiral Leonard H. McCoy. For a moment Garcia hesitated, wondering if this had been a taped message, for he had attended McCoy's funeral a little over four months prior.

"Tam?! I am glad to see you up and about. How are you feeling?" McCoy said.

"Computer, is this a live feed?" Garcia asked.

"Tam, it's me. McCoy. I'm alive," McCoy said, talking over the computer's response of 'affirmative.' "I wanted you to hear it from me before you heard it through the grapevine."

"How is this possible?" Garcia stammered, coming closer to the screen.

"You no doubt know that the Preservers made a copy of you and that your copy was responsible for the destruction of their space station in Iotia space," McCoy said. "What wasn't in the report was that they also made a copy of me, removed my Katra that you were carrying and then put it back into my body. In essence, your copy rescued me."

"This is too fantastic," Garcia said, skeptically. Still that would explain why he

had not had hallucinations of McCoy ever since he was abducted. He still only had vague memories of the abduction, which he was certain were false memories. What he wouldn't trade to have some of his other self's memories from the point of their division.

"No one told me you were alive or that I, the other me, saved you," Garcia protested.

"I asked them to keep my return a secret. I wanted to tell you," McCoy said. "I wanted to tell you in person when you got here, but the Enterprise will be arriving after I have already departed."

"Departed? Where are you going? Better, how did you get to Earth from Iotia if I rescued you at Iotia? None of this is making any sense," Garcia said.

"I'll send you my report," McCoy said. "It'll explain everything you need to know."

"Everything I need to know?" Garcia asked. "That suggest there are things you don't want me to know."

"Tam, I was afraid you weren't going to live, judging from Crusher's reports," McCoy said. "I just wanted to call and speak to you. I wanted to see for myself you were okay."

"I'm well, thank you," Garcia said. "I'm Okay. You're okay. Everyone seems to be okay. How come there isn't a media storm covering your return from the dead?"

"Whoa, hold it," McCoy said. "I'm not ready for that story to break. And when it does, Star Fleet wants to put a spin on it. They want it to look as if my death had been faked in order for me to complete a mission. In fact, the mission I'm going on requires me to still be dead."

"Aren't you a bit old for this cloak and dagger crap?" Garcia asked.

"I'm not too old to kick your butt," McCoy said.

"Why exactly did you call me?" Garcia asked.

"Because, I love you, son," McCoy said. "I should only be gone for three to six months, which will have me back in plenty of time to see you graduate. Everything will be cleared up by then and I will be able to go out in public. Just try to be safe till I get back, alright?"

"I'm always safe," Garcia argued.

"Except when you're trying to be the hero," McCoy said. "Look, I have to go. Really, take care of yourself till I get back."

"I will," Garcia said. "Garcia out."

The screen went dark before the Star Fleet emblem appeared. Garcia turned to Selar. "Did you know he was alive?"

"This is the first I am learning about it," Selar said. "I am just as surprised as you are. And, from the sounds of it, perhaps I shouldn't have heard this message."

"Forget it," Garcia said. "Literally."

In a bit of a temper, Garcia stormed out of Selar's quarters. He had not taken the time to put on his boots, but no one he passed seemed to notice or care. It took him all of six minutes to arrive at the guest quarters where Lt. Nancy Carter was staying. Garcia had learned about his Preserver clone from reading her report of her explorations of the artifact slash space station, which everyone believed was Preserver. Garcia had his doubts about it being Preserver, but it did explain so much of what he had seen on Iotia. Her report failed to mention McCoy's rescue. She answered the door and brightened

instantly, hugging him.

"Come in," Carter said.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Garcia asked.

"Tell you what?" she asked.

"That McCoy is still alive," Garcia said. "That's pretty significant."

Carter frowned. "I was told not to," she said. "I wanted to, I knew it would make you feel better, considering the number of losses you were grieving, but they made it an order."

"Who's they?" Garcia asked.

"Picard, for starters. My understanding was that he was operating under orders from McCoy," Carter said.

"This just doesn't make sense, Nancy. Why would this be kept from me? I'm in the loop. At least, I thought I was in the loop," Garcia said.

"Tam, I am really not at liberty to discuss this any further," Carter said. "Maybe you should talk to Picard."

"Maybe I will," Garcia said, turning to leave. It seemed obvious to Garcia that there was more going on than even the "hot news flash" that McCoy was still alive. What was this crazy mission he was running off on? What was so important that McCoy couldn't be declared alive?

"Oh, wait," Carter said. "I almost forgot. Garcia, I mean, your copy, gave me something to give to you."

Garcia followed her towards her bedroom, but didn't cross over the threshold. He didn't know where her daughter, Niki, was but he didn't want for her to come in and find him in her mom's bedroom. Nancy reached for her jacket and retrieved two small orbs, no bigger than golf balls. She handed these to him. They had the weight of lead, but the appearance of marble.

"What are they?" Garcia asked.

"Preserver technology, I assume," Carter said. "They act like holographic emitters, only they create real matter. They're holographic remotely operated vehicles, from what I gathered, and my understanding is that these particular two orbs are attuned to your brain wave signature. You should be able to access them telepathically. You were able to use it to manifest your extra personalities on the hive ship."

"Something else that was left out of the report," Garcia said. "How do they work?"

"I don't know," Carter said.

"Let me" the Deanna Troi program in Garcia's head said, coming out of nowhere and into his visual perception. She touched one of the orbs with her fingers and it illuminated. "Accessing. Oh, this is going to be nice. Stand by."

Suddenly the orb lifted up out of Garcia's hand, pulled back as if Deanna was carrying it away, and then the Deanna Troi program manifested herself into real life. It was as if she had been transported in. The orb became lost somewhere in her person. The HROV Deanna Troi took in a sudden, deep breath and sighed a pleasant sigh, as if she had just emerged from a long lap of the pool completely submerged. She stepped forwards and kissed Garcia hard on the mouth.

"Oh, Tam, you can't imagine how wonderful it is to be liberated," HROV Troi said, hugging him and then biting him on the ear. She turned to Nancy. "How could you

have forgotten to give these to him?"

"I was just so caught up in everything that happened, and then being reunited with my daughter, and..." Carter said.

Suddenly all of Garcia's mental companions were present. Duana and Ilona began to bicker about who would access the remaining Orb when the downloaded program of Lal stepped up and ended all debate. No sooner than she was in her new manifested body was she out the door.

"Hold up!" Garcia said. "Wait."

Garcia pursued Lal, catching up with her. He had no intentions of grabbing her, for that would have been rude, but he wanted to know what she was about. Ever since Data and he had linked minds, Lal had been running around in his head, which he hadn't minded so much because she was rather quiet and unobtrusive, compared to his other mental companions. But now, she was out and almost running her stride was so great. Deanna was pursuing, enjoying the exertion. She commented on just how alive she felt and how wonderful it was to feel her blood flowing and her leg muscles flex. She asked him to look at her legs.

"Not now," Garcia snapped. "Lal, wait. Where are you going?"

"I'm going to see my father," Lal said.

"Maybe you should call Data," HROV Troi said.

Garcia couldn't argue with that. The three of them paused in the corridor. He tapped his communicator badge and said, "Garcia to Data. I need to see you. Now."

"Ensign Garcia?" Data responded. "I am presently occupied at Ops. Perhaps we could communicate later?"

"Father?" Lal asked.

But the communication was closed out, from Data's side. She continued on her way to find her father.

"Lal, we will talk with Data later, but right now, why don't we just return to my quarters," Garcia said.

"No," Lal said.

"Deanna, talk some sense into her," Garcia asked.

Lal stopped and accessed a turbo lift. Garcia and the HROV Troi followed her.

"We could wait in Data's quarters," HROV Troi suggested.

"No we can't," Garcia said. "I can't condone entering Data's quarters, even if she is his daughter."

"Bridge," Lal said.

"Computer, relay that order," Garcia said. "Lal, we can't go to the Bridge. You can't just go to the Bridge."

"Why?" Lal asked.

"Well, because," Garcia began and stammered at a sudden loss of a good argument. "Just because. There are rules, protocols, a chain of command, and..."

"Computer, resume. Bridge," Lal said.

"Maybe you should let her have this," HROV Troi said.

"Maybe you've lost your mind," Garcia said. "I'm the one that's going to get in trouble, not either of you."

A moment later Lal stepped off onto the Bridge, took a moment to orientate herself, found her father and headed right to him. Garcia followed, grimacing. Before

Lal was even halfway to Data, Garcia's prediction had come true.

"What is the meaning of this?" Picard demanded, expressing his anger at both the interruption and the intrusion onto the bridge.

"I think I can explain," Garcia began.

"I think you better," the real Troi said, standing up, arms akimbo. She was reminded of the time she had met herself on the holodeck, courtesy of Lt. Barclay. "And start with explaining her."

Riker found himself suddenly amused at the real Troi's lack of humor, impressed by the outfit the "fake" Troi was wearing, and not a little surprise that Garcia was somehow involved in it all. Riker managed to maintain his composure, for the most part, with only the real Deanna aware of his mirth.

Worf stepped forward and grabbed Garcia's arm to impede further progress. They exchanged glances.

"Counselor Troi, rogue Troi program. Rogue Troi program, yourself," Garcia said.

"Senior staff to the conference room," Picard said. "Now. Ensign."

Garcia didn't need further explanation to know that his presence wasn't just expected, but rather, it was demanded. Worf took liberty to escort him.



"This is very interesting," Doctor Crusher said, completing her scans of both the HROV Lal and the HROV Troi. "There are no sign of the technological devices that are projecting them, nor are there any signs of any radiation fields that one might expect to find around a hologram."

"We're not holograms," the HROV Troi said.

"She's right," Crusher said. "The HROV Troi is actual flesh and blood. The HROV Lal is, however, an android, exactly as Data had designed her."

"Minus the quantum fluctuations that caused her brain to fail," Data added.

"How did you forget to tell us that you brought this alien technology on my ship," Picard asked Carter.

"I'm sorry, Sir," Carter said, appearing remorseful. She looked to Captain Munoz, her commanding officer, and back to Picard, the Captain of the Enterprise who had come to their rescue at Iotia. "Lack of sleep, the joy of being reunited with my daughter, and then, everything else that happened on top of that... There's no excuse, Sir. I dropped the ball."

"Try and help me to understand what's going on here," Riker said, directing his statement to Doctor Crusher. "Is Garcia telepathically controlling these HROV's?"

"Not directly," Garcia said before Crusher could respond. "If I am, it's completely subconscious."

"Do you notice anything unusual?" the real Counselor Troi asked.

"Define unusual?" Garcia asked. "The fact that I'm in conference with two Troi's?"

"I think she meant are you experiencing any unusual side effects to the technology," Doctor Selar said. "My readings of your brain scan show nothing unusual, for you."

"I feel a bit of euphoria," Garcia said. "Similar to when I plugged into the Kelvan computer, or how I felt when I activated the HROV that I created while on the

Philadelphia Freedom. It's of greater intensity than the HROV I created, so I assume it must be a derivative of the amount of information my brain is now processing through these two Orbs."

"That would make sense," Doctor Crusher said. "The Kelvan may have increased the efficiency of your human brain, but in the end, the human brain has a finite capacity, greatly limited from the Kelvan perspective. The addition of these two orbs have increased your mental capacity, approaching your true Kelvan limit. A certain amount of euphoria should be expected."

"I also feel lighter, for wanting of a better phrase," Garcia added.

"Well, you are two personalities lighter," Riker pointed out.

"No," Doctor Selar said. "The personality matrix of the Deanna and Lal programs still reside in Garcia's head. They are merely being projected through the Preserver technologies."

"So, are you saying that right now Garcia is controlling it, howbeit subconsciously?" LaForge asked.

"I'm making an assumption that Garcia is in control of it, since it is his brain that is linked to the technology," Doctor Selar said. "The fact that the extra personalities seem to have a greater degree of control over the HROV Orbs may only be an illusion, since they are also a part of Garcia's brain. Ultimately they share a common goal, the well being of the organism we know as Tammus Garcia."

"Very clinical of you, Doctor" Garcia said.

"Thank you, Doctor," Doctor Selar said.

"Okay," LaForge said. "But if Garcia is only loosely controlling it, then we can assume that it would be possible for someone else to gain access of this technology and use it for purposes other than Garcia's well being. Or ours."

"I would have to agree with that premise. Since it is telepathically controlled, then anyone of sufficient telepathic strength should be able to operate it," Selar said.

"Including the Preservers who created the technology," Worf said.

"Now, just a moment," Garcia said. "We're assuming that this is Preserver technology."

"Gary Seven warned us about the dangers of their technology," Riker said. "I say we turn the technology off and destroy it before a Preserver decides to hijack it and cause us some harm, damage, or any other inconvenience."

"Now, wait just a damn moment," the HROV Troi interrupted.

"Father, please," Lal said, squeezing Data's hand. "I want to stay with you."

"That may not be possible, Lal," Data said. "If you are indeed a manifestation of Garcia's telepathic abilities focused through the Preserver's HROV, I think it safe to conclude that there is a finite perimeter of functionality, with Garcia the center of that perimeter. Should he go out of range, you may cease to exist."

"No, she would simply disappear," the HROV Troi said. "We still reside inside Garcia's brain."

"But father," Lal said.

"You are still safe with Garcia," Data said.

"But he is not you, father. He ignores us," Lal said.

"I'm trying to function in the everyday world and do my job," Garcia protested.

"No one's accusing you of any wrong doing, Tam," both Counselor Troi and HROV Troi said, simultaneously. The two Troi's exchanged perturbed glances.

"Until we better understand this technology, I think it prudent to deactivate them. We'll turn the technology over to Star Fleet research and let them decide on how to proceed," Picard said. "Garcia, if you will, please?"

Garcia shrugged. "I don't have clue how to turn them off."

"Perhaps if I shoot Garcia with a phaser on stun it would disable the orbs long enough to confiscate them," Worf argued.

"You'd enjoy that," Garcia said.

"I would," Worf agreed.

"I can deactivate the technology," the HROV Troi said.

"Tam, please," Lal begged Garcia. It was quite pitiful, seeing her full of emotions.

"Captain," Garcia said, interceding on Lal's behalf. After all, she did belong with Data, not in his head. "This technology clearly seems to belong to me. According to Carter, I gave it to myself. So whatever transpired with the other me, it was given to me or liberated by me for some purpose."

"We don't know how the other you came across this technology," Riker said. "For all we know, this could be the proverbial Trojan Horse."

"Thank you," Worf agreed. "And even if the technology was deemed safe, I doubt leaving it in Garcia's possession would be wise."

"What do you mean by that?" Garcia demanded.

"You know exactly what I mean by that," Worf growled. "You were a menace when you had the Kelvan technology in your possession, you were a danger to yourself and others when plugged into that alien artifact, and so I can only imagine what sort of mischief you would cause with Preserver technology at your disposal."

"If I recall correctly, I saved your butt with that Kelvan technology," Garcia said.

"While jeopardizing the whole crew," Worf argued.

"Jeopardizing how? It was my birth right to use that technology and had you not taken it away from me, I could have saved McCoy!" Garcia said, standing and slapping the table. "It's your fear of technology that is the real menace here."

Worf stood as if he were ready to accept Garcia's challenge, growling.

"Both of you sit down," Picard said.

Without breaking eye contact, Garcia and Worf sat down.

"Thank you," Picard said. "Now, Lal, Troi, I would like you both to disengage from the Preserver technology and deactivate the orbs. You must concede that this is for your safety as well as ours."

The HROV Troi and Lal stood as one. Troi disappeared first, leaving a floating orb where her forehead had been previously. Lal kissed her father.

"Father, I'm feeling something," Lal said. "I don't know. Is it fear? No. It's sadness. I want to stay with you."

"Lal, when I was unable to save you, I downloaded your memories and personality function into my own," Data said. "That download was a snap shot of all you were. It is still in my head and it is static. Since you were inadvertently downloaded into Garcia's brain, your program has begun to evolve again. You are growing and learning and having experiences. These are things I can not offer you. There may be a way for us to one day transfer your program back into the body I designed for you, but until then, I

require you to survive. No, more than survive. Pursue happiness and prosper. Garcia and I are friends. We will communicate frequently and you can share with me all of the new experiences you have, for even if they are vicariously attained through Garcia's perception, you still have your own point of view which is a valuable commodity. And do not be afraid to share your point of view with Garcia. He will listen to you. Though our separation is undesirable, this is still better than not having you at all."

"I love you, father," Lal said. "I'll comply with your wishes."

Lal faded away. To everyone in the room it appeared as if she had been beamed up by a transporter wave, the only difference was that the energy was reabsorbed by the orb. Both orbs brightened, fluoresced, and then blinked out. They dropped to the table with a clatter. Data caught one of them before it rolled off on his side. Garcia caught the other. Worf put his hand out to confiscate it. Garcia hesitated, but Worf leaned forward, menacingly, and Garcia handed it over without further fuss. Lal and the Troi program were still visible to Garcia, and he watched as the Troi program comforted Lal. They departed the room together, but were still somewhere in the depths of his mind.

"Data, LaForge, see what you can discover about these orbs," Picard said.

"Dismissed. Garcia, I'd like to have chat with you."

Garcia remained seated, sulking. The real Troi touched his shoulder. "Are you doing okay?"

"The Euphoria's gone," Garcia said.

"That's very telling," Troi said. "Maybe it's a good thing that they're turned off, especially if they're going to act as a stimulant or have a narcotic effect. Come by my office when you're done here."

"Oh, bloody hell," Garcia thought, wondering why he was always ending up in a counseling session when it was usually his extra personalities that required therapy, not him. Troi sent him a supportive burst of energy, accompanied by a smile as she glanced back at him before the doors closed. The doors whispered shut and he found himself alone with Picard.

"You got the message from McCoy," Picard said. He didn't have to ask. He knew about the call.

"You knew he was alive," Garcia said.

"He gave me the orders to go and rescue you," Picard said. "He has a very high opinion of you."

"He's biased," Garcia said.

"Sometimes you are a bit too quick to dismiss a compliment," Picard said.

Garcia rubbed his forehead. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Tam," Picard said, moving his chair around to be in line with Garcia. "You have so many people who care for you, so many resources at your disposal. There is no reason for you to be defensive. I'm offering you my support."

"Why didn't you tell me he was alive?" Garcia asked.

"McCoy wanted to do that himself, in person," Picard said.

"His call to me was a bit cryptic," Garcia said. "Something about a mission. Do you know anything about that?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," Picard said.

"So much for your offer of support," Garcia said, getting up. "Was there anything relevant you wanted to say to me?"

“You’re out of line, Mister,” Picard said, standing up. “I don’t care what sort of trauma you’ve been through recently, or what sort of losses you’ve experienced. As long as you’re in that uniform, I will demand a certain level of respect and decorum from you. Do you understand me?!”

“Yes, Captain,” Garcia said, his face going unreadable.

“You’re dismissed,” Picard said.

Garcia turned and left the conference room. His hallucinations Duana and Ilona followed. Duana supported Picard’s view and was letting Garcia know that his behavior was inappropriate. Ilona was filing her nails as she trailed behind, not a care in the world. Garcia took a lift down and went directly to Troi’s office. She was waiting for him, as were the Troi and Lal personalities. His mental companions took up the chair space, leaving the only place to sit next to the real Troi. Naturally he could sit over top of them, for they were only present in his head, but he found the experience of crossing through them uncomfortable. Instead, he paced.

“What’s going on?” Troi asked.

“Usual,” Garcia said.

“Why don’t you come sit by me?” Troi asked.

Garcia turned and saw her patting the couch. He frowned. It was the very place the mental companions had left for him. Duana smiled coyly. “I’ll stand. Thanks.”

“There was a time when you would have never refused to sit next to me,” Counselor Troi said.

“There was a time when I thought there would be no secrets between us,” Garcia said.

“What do you mean?” Troi asked.

“Did you know that McCoy was alive?” Garcia asked her.

“You need to stop asking people that question,” Troi said, bluntly.

“You did know!” Garcia said.

“Yes,” Troi said.

“Why do I feel like there is a conspiracy growing around me?” Garcia asked.

“Could it be because you were stuck on a gangster planet for over a month?” Troi asked. “Or maybe because your implant malfunctioned and you experienced a chemical imbalance and it is taking a while for your neural transmitter levels to return to normal. You need to just relax.”

“The Captain’s ban on my holodeck privileges are still in effect,” Garcia said.

“You need to find another way to relax,” Troi said. “Giving in to your holo-addiction isn’t a healthy choice.”

“It’s not an addiction,” Garcia argued.

“It isn’t?” Troi asked.

“It is the only thing that can give me enough visual audio tactile stimulation to distract me,” Garcia said. “Hello. Kelvan heritage?”

“Tam, you don’t need a distraction,” Troi said.

“Please, I’m sure you educate lots of patients on the art of distraction as a technique for reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety,” Garcia said.

“Yes, that is one tool for helping people. But you’re a master at distraction. You don’t need any more distractions,” Troi said. “You need to start dealing with your issues.”

“Could you be more specific, please?” Garcia asked.

“Come sit down, first,” Troi instructed.

Garcia complied but it appeared as if it were a struggle to remain seated. He sat next to her, perfect Vulcan posture. His leg began to shake. He shifted. He started to get up, but sat back. He placed his hands in his lap and looked at Troi.

“That’s a start,” Troi said. “Now, breathe.”

“I am breathing,” Garcia said.

“Breathe deeper,” Troi said, using her command voice.

Garcia heard anger, not ‘command.’ He took an exaggerated breath, while his mind sought the distractions present in the room. There was the sound of the life support. He was aware of Troi emulating the breathing technique she was encouraging him to practice, as her breast rose and fell in rhythmic fashion. There was the high pitch frequency of an energy conduit, a sound that was probably beyond anyone’s hearing but his. He was aware of Troi’s eyes fixated on his eyes. There was the votive candle on the coffee table. He was aware of Troi’s scent. Not just her biological uniqueness, but also a perfume, a brand which he was able to identify and label. It was the one Riker had given to her. Ilona pulled fingernail polish out from her pocket and began doing Lal’s nails. He closed his eyes, but heard Troi move forwards in her chair. His implant alerted him to a new email in his bank and he opened his eyes to avoid the temptation to reading the new file, which was from Jaxa. Troi unconsciously wet her lips. Duana made a joke about Garcia being uncomfortable.

“I’m not uncomfortable,” Garcia said, and started to get up.

The real Troi stopped him by putting a hand on his arm. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

Garcia closed his eyes and looked away from her. “Does it matter?”

“Yes,” Troi said.

“It’s nothing,” Garcia said.

“Now who’s keeping secrets?” Troi said, playfully.

Garcia looked at her. The intensity wasn’t lost on her. “It’s never been a secret,” Garcia said. “I’ve only told you a million times. And you’re here, filling up my senses and you wonder why I want to go distract myself on the holodeck?” He frowned at Duana who began to sing the John Denver song, “You fill up my senses...”

Troi squeezed his hand. “You need to let go of these ideas about us.”

“How can I? You live in my head,” Garcia said. “You’re with me every waking moment, if not visually in front of me, then somewhere, lurking in the back drop of my mind.”

“And with the discovery of this alien technology, you had the potential of fulfilling that fantasy,” Troi said.

“And I’m still getting blocked!” Garcia said. “It’s like this plot contrivance for a television series where this one guy spends his whole life chasing girl and girl resists.”

“You know what happens when the girl surrenders to the man’s charm, don’t you?” Troi asked.

“Tell me,” Garcia said.

“The television show goes off the air,” Troi said.

Garcia blinked. He saw the truth in that. Most shows lost their power over the audience once the romance was achieved.

“You’ve calmed a little,” Troi said.

“Nice distraction,” Garcia said. “Getting me to think about the sociological aspects of the chase and then how it might apply to us, me, life. I failed to mention that before Britney Bot was Britney, it was the rogue Troi program. I hear you and see you and I just want you around, in person. I want you.”

“I think there is a quote from Spock,” Troi said, trying to remember where she had heard it. She decided the ‘where had she heard it’ part was irrelevant. “Paraphrasing, here. Sometimes the wanting is much better than the actual having.”

“It doesn’t make the wanting less,” Garcia reminded her. Niki came to his mind. She had wanted him the same way he wanted Counselor Troi and for similar reasons he had not been able to respond to those feelings of affections. “And I am sorry. Sorry for saying that. Sorry of my relentless pursuit and the pressure and the trouble I have caused you.”

Troi put a finger to his lips to quiet him. “As I told you in the past, it’s not the wanting that is bad. I told you it was okay to have feelings of love for me, as long as you never acted on them, or stopped living your life because of them.”

“I know,” Garcia said. “And again, I’m sorry. Did you watch any of the Iotian television show of me and Niki? She and I performed the same little song and dance that you and I have played over the years, only in that situation I was the counselor that had to remain professional. Funny, uh?”

“Yes, actually,” Troi said, smiling. “I found it quite enjoyable. As they say, paybacks are hell.”

“Yeah, and what goes around comes around,” Garcia said. And then he noticed something. He was no longer trapped by his feelings for Troi. He could sit here with her, have a conversation, and could be happy that it didn’t end up with the two of them in bed. He could even get up and walk out of here and not feel bad that nothing happened. He was happy just being in her presence.

Deanna Troi felt the transition in him. It was partly her Betazoid sense and partly because she and Garcia shared a telepathic link. Garcia was now calm in her presence. She had never experienced him being so calm. There was no forced conversation, no expectation, and no pressure on her. And that was when she leaned over and kissed him.

Garcia didn’t tense up, nor was he confused. He could hear her in his head, telling him it was okay. He kissed her, turning towards her, and closed his eyes to focus on the sensation of her hands going up his spine to rest on the base of his neck. A very long time ago, when he was just a kid and she was still in training, she had reached out to him and established a telepathic link thinking she could help boost his confidence. Ever since that moment he had wanted to relive that moment, not to drown in her personality, but to have that communion, a mutual sharing of comfort and love. This moment was unlike before, not in a good or bad way, but just in a different way. Love had multiple meanings and they both sought the comfort and reassurance that only the two of them could offer each other. And it was all possible because Garcia had let go of his expectations and obsessions and simply accepted Deanna as the person she was, with no demands or obligations beyond the mutual desire to look out for each other’s well being.

CHAPTER TWO

Garcia read the email that had arrived earlier as he walked to visit Guinan. It was from Jaxa Sito and marked urgent. His heart sunk as he discovered Joshua Alberts was dead. He stopped in the corridor as he read through the description of the accident. He must have looked lost for an Enterprise crew member stopped and asked if he were well. Garcia nodded and pushed on down the corridor. The Enterprise would be arriving just in time for the funeral. He didn't remember ringing to be let into Guinan's quarters until the door opened and she asked him to come in. His mood was set by the news, which was a striking contrast to the joy he had just been feeling having just shared time with the real Deanna.

"You look depressed," Guinan said. "I thought you were feeling better."

"Joshua died," Garcia informed her, and then he had to tell her about who Joshua Alberts was and how he knew him. "I really liked him. Come to think of it, he was the first person at the Academy to extend an offer of friendship."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Guinan said.

Garcia nodded, never sure how to respond to that sort of comment. It wasn't that she was really "sorry" for she had nothing to do with Joshua's death, but rather, she was simply communicating empathy. She did understand loss. She had lost friends, family, even her entire home planet to the Borg. She had lost friends since then, too. The simple fact of nature was that you didn't get to be her age without losing friends and family along the way.

"We can speak another time if you like," Guinan offered.

"I will be fine," Garcia said. "Maybe you can teach me to time travel so I can go back and change this."

Guinan chuckled. "You're not ready for time traveling if that's your intention."

"You wouldn't do it? Even if it were someone very close to you?" Garcia asked.

"You've heard of the butterfly affect?" Guinan asked, even though she knew the answer.

"Yes," Garcia answered.

"Well, that is a simple metaphor for how convoluted a temporal intervention can become," Guinan said. "And it doesn't just affect this universe, but also the universes that run parallel to ours."

"Yes, yes," Garcia agreed with a wave of his hand, having read all the theories on quantum level events causing the universe and time line to split into infinity. A split with every choice or option. Multiple universes were known to exist but the theory that they were due to people making choices, well, that one was hard for him to believe, and he admitted so. "Some of that is just creative thinking gone awry. If making decisions cause space time to split into new realities in which the opposite decision was chosen, then I could be justified in making poor decisions in this reality in order to guarantee that another universe the other me makes better choices and has a better go at life."

Guinan smiled. It was a smile that warmed him through and through. She got up and retrieved a tray and brought it to the coffee table. She lifted a cover to reveal freshly made peanut butter cookies. She poured two glasses of vanilla flavored soy milk.

"If I don't eat one, I guess the other Garcia will have his fill?" Garcia continued to jest.

"If you don't eat one, I will end up eating them all and getting fat," Guinan said.

“But in the other reality, I will be fat and you will be thin,” Garcia offered. “Ahh, the trade offs we make for healthy living.”

“Eat,” Guinan said. “I made them especially for you.”

Garcia took a cookie and a glass of milk. He dipped the cookie into the milk and then bit out the saturated part of the cookie while eating over his glass.

“Awesome,” Garcia said, complementing the cook. “From scratch?”

“Are you kidding?” Guinan asked. “Of course they’re from scratch. The replicator made them from raw energy.”

Garcia chuckled. “That’s why I love you,” Garcia said. “So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

“I need to prepare you for something, but I don’t know how to go about it,” Guinan said. “What makes it difficult is the fact that the threat is a bit vague.”

“Oh, please not another cryptic advice session,” Garcia said. “I don’t like puzzles.”

“You love puzzles,” Guinan corrected.

“No, I hate puzzles. It’s simply that my OCD won’t allow me to leave one unfinished,” Garcia said.

“All I can tell you is that someone is coming to guide you through this next phase of your life,” Guinan said. “I was hoping it would be me, but my job is here on the Enterprise.”

“You can run a bar on my ship when I get one,” Garcia offered.

“Thank you, but I have things yet to do here,” Guinan said.

“And how will I know when my guide has found me?” Garcia asked.

“You’ll know,” Guinan said. “I just want you to keep an open mind and your eyes open.”

“When you’re ready, the master will come,” Garcia quoted an old ayurvedic saying.

“It’s a good saying,” Guinan said.

“I don’t suppose you’re going to give me any more information?” Garcia asked.

“Would you like another cookie?” Guinan asked.

“Yes, please,” Garcia answered. The rest of his time with Guinan was pleasant, with light conversations and observations about the world and the people in it. Guinan’s usual tendency to sneak in a lesson or use reflective listening skills to challenge the people in her presence to think was given a rest, so they could just simply be.



Tammas Garcia, Tatiana Keltsova, and Indira ‘Trini’ Sookanan arrived home with just enough time to clean up and change and head out the door again, in order to attend Joshua Alberts’ funeral. Tatiana and Trini were both carrying back packs with a few souvenirs they had brought back from Iotia, while Garcia carried nothing but his memories and the clothes on his back. He opened the door for them and followed them in. Kletsova and Trini stopped dead, stunned by what greeted them, but no sooner than Garcia walked in the front door, he was met enthusiastically by Rivan. She kissed and hugged him and then turned to Trini and Tatiana, hugging them in that order.

“I am so glad to see you,” Rivan said.

“You’re pregnant,” Kletsova said, stating the obvious.

“I am!” Rivan practically beamed joy, even more than her usual radiance.

“Oh, Rivan,” Kletsova said. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Rivan asked.

“We knew about your cultural disposition towards casual and free sex and we should have hooked you up with birth control,” Kletsova said.

“Control?” Rivan asked. “I don’t understand.”

“We have medicines that can prevent you from becoming pregnant,” Trini said.

“Why would anyone want to do that?” Rivan asked. “Children are joy and I am bringing more joy to the world.”

Kletsova blew out a heavy sigh. “Do you know who the father is?” she asked.

“The commune was very explicit the first night we broke bread,” Rivan said. “I was to limit the number of people I shared that sort of intimacy with.”

“So, you do know who the father is,” Kletsova said.

“Of course,” Rivan said. “Tam is the father.”

Garcia blinked. Kletsova and Trini looked to Garcia with a different look than the look Rivan was giving him. Garcia seemed genuinely surprised, but they weren’t buying it.

“Tammias Parkin Arblaster Garcia,” Kletsova said. “We can forgive Rivan for not knowing about birth control, but you have no excuse, especially as much as you get around.”

“I take an annual male birth control shot,” Garcia said. “This can’t be.”

“Well, we really don’t have time to discuss it now,” Trini said. “We’re going to be late to the funeral.”

“I anticipated needing to hurry, so I have prepared food to carry with us as we travel, if you like,” Rivan said.

“You’re very kind,” Trini said. “And thank you.”

Ambassador Clemmons came trotting up, dodging Trini who bent down to pet him. Clemmons bypassed Kletsova, as well, and went right to Garcia. Clemmons immediately proceeded to scent mark Garcia, mewing loudly. Trini pouted.

“Ambassador Clemmons has missed you, too,” Rivan laughed.

“So I see,” Garcia said. “Excuse me, while I go freshen up and change.”

Rivan was all talk while they took a tram to the sight of the wake, telling them about her classes and some of the people she had met. Garcia listened mostly and ate the food that Rivan had made. He had brought a medical tricorer and had confirmed that Rivan’s child was his, and per her wishes, she did not want to know what sex the child was. All she cared about was the fact that it was healthy. He also performed a scan on himself and found that his body still had the appropriate levels of the male birth control in his system, which should be a hundred percent effective against preventing unwanted conception, but apparently for him, it was only ninety nine point nine percent effective. Trini jested about his swimmers and then had to explain her joke to Rivan, who had never taken a human biology course or seen sperm under a microscope.

“Can you show me this later?” Rivan asked.

“If you like,” Garcia said.

Kletsova was kinder in disposition than usual, but it was Trini who kept up with Rivan in the exchange of information, the pitch of their voices shooting up through the soprano range when occasional bits of insight or amusement struck them.

The wake for Joshua was held at West Garden and Locarno spoke on behalf of Nova Squadron. Jaxa didn't look back and so Garcia was unable to catch her eye. After the ceremony, after Joshua Alberts was laid to rest, people began to mingle, with some of the guests taking turns to go up and share something personal with Joshua's parents. There was food and drink, millions of flowers, and a harpist, which occasionally distracted Garcia. She wasn't a particularly good harpist, from Garcia's perspective, which probably meant she was a friend of Joshua or his family. Garcia would have preferred bag pipes and Amazing Grace if it were his funeral. He preferred that the harp be reserved for the bedside of the dying since medical studies showed that a good harpist could reduce pain by nearly sixty percent, easing the transition into death. Doctor Crusher, Wesley Crusher, and Troi were having a conversation, which seemed a bit serious so Garcia decided not to intrude. Troi did acknowledge Garcia staring at her with a secret smile. Rivan hugged Garcia's arm and excused herself from their group to go speak with Captain Picard. Garcia excused himself, too, and made his way to the refreshments. Just as he was collecting a cup of tea he was met by Captain Janeway.

"How are you doing?" Janeway asked him, collecting some tea for herself as well.

"Fine," Garcia said, barely meeting her eyes. For the first time since he arrived, he spied Jaxa gazing at him. He nodded to her. She turned her attention back to the people she was with. It was just as well, Garcia thought. He was about to be a father and should be considering settling down.

"Ummm," Captain Janeway said. "Fine is a noncommittal response, typically given only out of politeness, and could be interpreted as a brush off."

Garcia smiled. "And how are you doing is usually a greeting equivalent to a passing hello that really isn't meant as a substantive query," Garcia said.

"The fact that I'm still here, listening, should alert you to the fact that my query was genuine," Janeway said.

"Indeed," Garcia said. "Point taken. And I know you mean it."

"You really need to work on your people skills," Duana said, startling Garcia as he hadn't seen her approach. He mentally shouted a reprimand, reminding her to give a person more heads up. "You can't always be this moody," she went on.

"Moody," Garcia echoed, ignoring Duana's request that he try a particular appetizer. "Well, Captain, to answer you're query, I can honestly say I am not lonely."

"One can be lonely even surrounded by people," Janeway said, taking Garcia by the arm and leading him away from the refreshment table, hoping to establish a private perimeter for a quiet talk with Garcia. A person had intended to approach her but she discouraged it with a look and the person found something else to do.

Garcia walked with her. "Yes, and that can be the worst kind of loneliness," he said, the song "one is the loneliest number" by Three Dog Night popped into his head. He tried to suppress it, but Duana picked it up and carried it off.

"And when you say you're not lonely, that tells me how you aren't, not how you are," Janeway said. "I don't know how much of this social banter is a game, or simple deflection, and so I will just come out and say that I care and reaffirm my friendship with you."

"Would it be inappropriate to hug you?" Garcia asked.

Captain Janeway embraced Garcia and patted his back. "No, of course not," she said. "So, what's on your mind?"

They separated and started walking.

"There does seem to always be something," Garcia said, deciding not to speak of the fact that he was to be a father yet. "I have a bit of a no win scenario to face soon, which is really the most pressing."

"Really?" Janeway asked. "Tell me about it."

"Admiral Madison wants me to direct a song that is beyond the performance abilities of the choir for this coming graduation. He's of the mindset that a song is just a song, but it's much more than that. He might as well be asking me to burn a flag," Garcia said.

"Interesting choice in analogies," Janeway said.

"How so?" Garcia asked.

"Well, first, it's good to hear that you're problem solving," Janeway said. "That means, to me at least, that you are coping well with all we've been through. All you've been through since we parted company."

"Are there any other options?" Garcia asked.

"Naturally," Janeway said, understanding that he meant it as a joke. "We always have choice, Tam. Part of problem solving is looking for the best choice. So, let's break this problem down. You've been instructed to play a specific song which you're equating to burning a flag. That's interesting. Flag burning is a constitutionally protected form of free speech. Playing music is also a form of speech, and consequently, is equally protected. So, why not just make this an exercise of free speech?"

Garcia blinked.

"Because, when it comes to you performing music, people tend to listen regardless of the form it takes," Janeway continued.

"Thank you, Captain," Garcia said.

"For what? Did I give you an idea?" Janeway asked.

"Maybe," Garcia said. "Or a boost in confidence."

"Like you need that," Janeway said, mussing his hair. "You know your abilities. You know your weaknesses. That puts you ahead of the game. And speaking of which, I would like you to look me up after you graduate. It would be nice working with you again."

"If they don't make me Captain right out of the chute, I will do just that," Garcia said.

Janeway hugged him and then excused herself, for the gentleman who had wanted to speak with her was coming back around. It was obvious to Garcia that she needed to go. Garcia said farewell and then approached Admiral Alberts, Joshua's father to give his condolences. As he headed away from this duty, an officer approached Garcia and introduced his self.

"I'm Captain Mantel," he said. He handed Garcia a summons. "This is a summons for you to appear in court, Thursday at nine hundred hours."

"In court for what?" Garcia asked.

"Court Martial proceedings," Captain Mantel said. "Good day, Sir."



Garcia paced while Kletsova read the summons to the commune. His plans to talk to Rivan about the baby had been pushed to the back burner. He didn't have time for this. Of course, if he was booted out of Star Fleet he could devote more time to Rivan

and the child to be, that was for sure, so perhaps the universe was unfolding as it should be. Maybe the Universe was giving him a sign.

"I can't believe this," Trini repeated.

"It's just a formal necessity," Kletsova said. "I wouldn't worry too much."

"Did you break the law, Tam?" Rivan asked.

"No," Kletsova said. "He blew up a starship, that's all."

"I bet they try to go for a violation of the Prime Directive as well," Trini said.

"There are no formal charges here," Kletsova said. "It's just a pretrial to determine whether or not charges should be levied."

"Well, should we call a lawyer?" Rivan asked.

"Yes," Kletsova and a Trini said.

"No," Garcia said.

"Tam, don't be stupid. You need legal representation," Kletsova said.

"I'll represent myself," Garcia said.

"That's not wise," Trini said.

"If he's done nothing wrong, then he should be fine," Rivan said. "And, this will be a great opportunity for me to learn more of the justice system here."

"This is not a game, Rivan," Kletsova said.

"Yes it is," Garcia said, heading for the door.

"Where are you going?" Rivan asked.

"I've got to go whip the choir and orchestra into shape," Garcia said.

"Can't that wait, considering this?" Trini asked, pointing to the summons.

"Admiral Madison is taking no excuses," Garcia said. "Don't wait up for me."



Garcia started with the orchestra, giving the choir a break. After working with them for about thirty minutes, he sent them on break and called the choir. Admiral Chilton, the normal conductor, had been working with them, and had them for the most part up to speed. It would certainly pass human standards, but since the piece in question was Vulcan, it had to pass Vulcan standards. For Vulcans, it was not up to muster. He had the choir start singing, grimaced, and stopped them before finishing one stanza.

"Alright, one at a time, first three bars only," Garcia said, and started with the bottom row. He went down the row and listened to everyone, having some sit when they were finished and having some remain standing.

"Alright, you, you, you, you, and you," Garcia said, pointing at them and indicating position changes. After they had taken their new positions, he pointed to two specific people. "You're now going to be the leads and performing the solo sections, just for this song. You, you, and you, I would like to speak with you, outside. Everyone else, take a five minute break."

Garcia walked off the stage, exiting the back door that led outside the amphitheatre. He was out the door and the door swinging shut before the three he wanted to chat with came down off the stand. Garcia had an urge for a cigar, even though he didn't smoke them. He just wanted to hold it and smell it and then he remembered he was to be a father. The three cadets appeared. The first seemed intimidated by Garcia's presence, the second seemed uncertain, and the third looked ready for a fight.

"I understand that you have worked really hard on this and I want to avoid throwing you out all together, because other than this song, your performances are

adequate,” Garcia said. “Would the three of you be willing to lip sync the words and not produce any sounds, just for this selection?”

“You’re joking, right?” the third person asked.

“No,” Garcia said. “And since I assume that you are all for making this work, without bringing down the group, you will be willing to comply with this request.”

“What are we doing wrong?” the first cadet asked.

“You specifically, are butchering the Vulcan language. You have a lisp,” Garcia said.

“I don’t have a lisp!” he argued.

“In Vulcan, you have a lisp,” Garcia said. “As for you, the quality of your voice does not allow for the smooth blending with the other voices of the choir. You’re also missing the pitches significantly enough for a Vulcan to discern. They might not pick you out of the choir as the offender, but they will hear it.”

“I’ve been taking Vulcan language lessons,” the first said.

“And you can speak it just fine, I’m sure, but you can’t sing in Vulcan,” Garcia said. “It requires a different skill set which you have not learned or have not mastered, and it may save you time and frustration for me to add that you may not have the physical structures necessary to reproduce the Vulcan dialect in song. Nothing personal, just a biological quirk.”

“This is insulting,” the third said. “We’ve busted our asses learning this song and you’re just going to throw us out.”

“No, I’m asking you not to sing,” Garcia said. “Throwing you out is a last resort. I am going to ask for your word that you won’t sing and trust you to follow through with that promise.”

“I can’t believe this,” the second said. “Can’t you train us?”

“Not in one week,” Garcia said. “And I can’t justify the medical need to alter you physically just to sing. So, what’s it going to be? Will you take one for the group?”

The three of them considered and tentatively agreed.

“Thank you,” Garcia said.

Garcia followed them back inside. Jaxa Sito was waiting next to the door. He had seen her in attendance in the stands, watching the rehearsal, but had offered her no recognition. She reached out and touched his arm, providing him with a distraction from the glare he was getting from one of the three.

“Do you have a moment?” Jaxa asked.

“I’m rather busy, as you can see,” Garcia said.

“I know, I just need a moment,” Jaxa said, almost pleading.

Garcia nodded and went back outside. Jaxa followed and as soon as they were outside she hugged him and began to cry.

“Why haven’t you come to see me?” Jaxa asked. “I need you.”

“I haven’t had time, Jaxa. I’ve been running since the transporter set my feet on Earth,” Garcia said. “What can I do for you?”

“You make it sound so clinical,” Jaxa said. “I just need you. I need you to hold me. To reassure me everything is going to be alright.”

“I can’t do that,” Garcia said.

“You can’t hold me?” Jaxa said.

"I can hold you, but I can't tell you everything is going to be alright," Garcia said. He tried to console her a little. "Look, I liked Josh. I miss him, too. But he wouldn't want us mourning him like this."

"I know," Jaxa said. "But it's not just about Josh."

"Will you tell me about the accident?" Garcia asked.

"I told you in the letter I sent you," Jaxa said.

"I know, but I want to hear it from you," Garcia said.

"Don't you believe me?" Jaxa said.

A warning bell went off in Garcia's head. "Should I have reason for doubt?" Garcia asked.

"What's with the questions?" Jaxa asked.

"Um, you started the questions," Garcia said. "I simply requested you tell me what happened so as to engage you in a therapeutic point of view, thinking you want to talk about it. But if you don't want to talk about it, and yet, you are asking me for help, then I have to ask you to clarify what it is you want from me."

"I just want to know you love me," Jaxa said.

"Alright, I love you," Garcia said. "Now, I have some work to do."

"That's it?" Jaxa asked.

"What do you want?"

"Tell me you'll meet up with me after you're through here," Jaxa said.

"I haven't thought that far ahead," Garcia said.

"If you don't want me around, just say so!" Jaxa said.

"I didn't say that," Garcia said.

"But you didn't not say it, either," Jaxa said. "Invite me to stay."

"Invite you to stay? You're already here!" Garcia pointed out. "Ahhh! I don't have time for this."

Garcia threw his hands up and walked back inside. Jaxa followed.

"Please, don't walk away from me," Jaxa said.

"What is this about?" Garcia demanded.

Jaxa grimaced at his shouting and started to walk away, but he grabbed her arm.

"No, wait. You started this. What is going on here?" Garcia asked.

"You're hurting me," Jaxa complained.

Garcia instantly let go and put his hands up in an 'I surrender' gesture. "Jaxa, I hear that you need something, but I don't know how to help you because you aren't telling me something. So, tell me, what's going on here?"

"Nothing, obviously," Jaxa said. "I'm sorry I bothered you. Hell, I don't know why I even thought you cared about me. I wonder if you actually care about anything other than winning your games and graduating with honors. What am I to you? A game? A conquest? Well, you win. You got me. What a fool I am."

Garcia blinked, uncertain how to respond.

Jaxa took his silence to mean what she thought it meant, turned, and walked out. Garcia blinked again, trying to comprehend the chaos that had just ensued. He became aware of the many eyes that were on him, even though when he looked, no eyes seemed to be on him. He shook off his uneasiness, and returned to the conductor's pedestal.

"Alright, choir, let's try this again, from the top."

After seven more stop and starts, and a more instances of repositioning people, Garcia put his wand down and dismissed everyone. “Good night, folks. Let’s try this again tomorrow.”

Some people departed immediately, a mob of about twenty people came up to him to engage him in conversation, and a fewer still held back, hoping to talk to Garcia after the majority had disappeared. This whole affair extended Garcia’s stay another hour. Mostly, people just wanted to ask for tips or pointers, things they didn’t need but perhaps in speaking to Garcia their ego’s were boosted. Some were flat out testing him. A few of them were no doubt hitting on him, which seemed extremely odd to him considering the scene they had witnessed between him and Jaxa. The last one to speak to him was one of the soprano’s he had moved to lead position for the solo. She had sat quietly on the music stand, waiting her turn, and when the last of his groupies had left, she gathered her things and stood.

“Doctor Garcia,” she said, almost timidly. “Are you sure you want me up front?”

“Are you saying you don’t want the solo?” Garcia asked.

“I love performing, but I prefer the anonymity of the group,” she said.

“Lisa,” Garcia said, and she smiled when she realized he knew her name. He had been purposely informal during the session, not singly anyone out by using their name, even though he knew the name of every one that would be performing, having read their bios. Lisa Kettler didn’t have the best musical training out of the choir, but she had the most natural talent, and given the chance to shine, Garcia believed she would radiate like a nova. “Your voice, your diction, your bearing, and your expression of the musical phrases without an overabundance of emotion is exactly what I want for this. It’s what this song calls for. You could even over dramatize and add more emotions and it would be okay with me, because you will still be restrained enough to reflect the Vulcan conflict of this song. Fate has made this your song. One of the challenges of this song is to insert emotion without it seeming emotional, a thing that most humans simply can’t comprehend. It’s either one or the other, but rarely both simultaneously. This duality expresses the condition of being Vulcan, who, contrary to popular belief, do have emotions, but suppress them. You just have the right mix.”

“I get stage fright,” Lisa admitted. “I am afraid. It’s obvious you take this song very seriously. What if I mess it up?”

“Then I will take the fall,” Garcia said. “I even give you permission to blame me.”

Lisa laughed. “I wouldn’t blame you,” Lisa said.

“Get some rest. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Garcia said.



Garcia returned home to a quiet house. Rivan and Clemmons were asleep in his bed and he watched her for awhile, noting that she even seemed to look happy in her sleep. He considered going to the couch to sleep, but decided this was his bed and he was going to sleep in it. He brushed his teeth and managed to crawl into bed without rousing Rivan, but Clemmons got up, stretched, and then went and lay down on Garcia’s pillow, against Garcia’s head as if it were a hat. He repositioned the cat next to him and went to sleep. The next thing he knew was that it was day light and the monitor on his desk was alerting him to an incoming call. Imagining Rivan must have altered the settings on it, he

quickly got up to answer it before it woke her. He was unsuccessful in not waking her, and she started kissing him, but he resisted and answered the phone.

Admiral Madison was on the other end of the line. "How dare you cut my grandson out of this song? If this is some underhanded, passive aggressive response to get even with me for forcing you to be the conductor, then I should remind you that I am capable of retaliating."

"Not only did you force me into this position, you gave me free artistic license to do as I see fit to make this song happen. You want it, you're going to have to compromise, and even asking your grandson not to sing is no guarantee I am going to pull this off," Garcia said. "Further, you're lucky I don't kick him out all together, because he can't hold a tune to save his life. As it is, he'll still get credit for doing the song, provided none of the Vulcan's in the attendance can read lips at a distance."

"You better not make me regret I chose you for this," Madison said.

"Please, the only reason you chose me was because you knew no one else could do it. It's not too late," Garcia said. "Drop the song."

"I can't," Madison said. "The itinerary went out several weeks ago."

"You should be happy, then, that it will be my head that rolls when I fail to pull this off," Garcia said, and hung up on him.

"Troubles?" Rivan asked, stretching. She seemed unconcerned with the exchange, as if she recognized it for what it was: a game.

"Just my life," Garcia said.

"Come back to bed," Rivan said. "I'll make it better."

He smiled and started for the bed when another call came through. Since it was from Vulcan, with a very high profile, he chose to take it. It proved to be a prerecorded message and it was sent by Simone. "On behalf of T'Pau, I send you greetings. I am calling to inform you that I will be attending the graduation ceremony on behalf of T'Pau and planet Vulcan in order to experience the LoraEs which you are scheduled to perform. I will arrive in two days and will be staying at the Vulcan Embassy. If your schedule permits, I would like to see you. Simone out."

"Oh my," Rivan said. "Is that her? The Vulcan Princess you wrote me about?"

"Yes," Garcia said.

"She is stunning," Rivan said.

"She has her moments," Garcia said.

"Well, I think this moment is mine," Rivan said, taking his hand and pulling him back to bed.

He came to bed and lay beside her as she kissed him affectionately, but she could tell he was not into it. "Are you mad at me?" Rivan asked.

"No," Garcia said. "I am just trying to figure out how we should proceed with our relationship. Most Earth customs require marriage and monogamy..."

At the word monogamy Rivan burst into laughter. "You're joking, right?" she asked. She discerned he was quite serious. "How can good traits be evenly distributed through a population if you only have one partner?"

Garcia thought about it, recognizing that her question suggested she had more knowledge of biology than any here had imagined, even though she lacked specific anatomical or physiological understanding. "Well, your population is obviously small, and requires a more open society in order to improve the genetic stock. This society's

population is large enough that family's can concentrate on the nurturing of one or two children."

"Isn't the whole village responsible for raising the children?" Rivan asked.

"Our village is so large that it is often difficult to ascribe responsibility to all agents," Garcia said. "Remember how we found you? You were alone and crying and lots of people passed by you and didn't interfere?"

"They would pass up a child in need?" Rivan asked, appalled.

"Probably not," Garcia said. "Most adults in general would come to the aid of a child, but they would quickly turn the problem over to people in authority that are trained to handle the particular situation. That's the other part of the equation. Not all adults are equipped emotionally or intellectually to deal with children. In other words, they lack training."

"Your way of raising a child seems more lonely," Rivan said. "I don't know if I could do it that way, alone. I would want my mother and my grand mother and my neighbor and father and my brother. Tam, I have tentatively agreed to live by your ways and customs while I am here, but I can not do this alone."

"You won't be alone," Garcia assured her. "I will be here for you."

"You understand that I will one day have to return home," Rivan said. "Maybe not today, or a year from now, or ten years from now, but I must go home and share with my people what I have learned."

"I know," Garcia said.

"You could come with me," Rivan said. "My people would welcome you with open arms."

"I know," Garcia said.

Rivan kissed him and snuggled in closer. "I love you, Tam. You have given me so much joy."

"I know," Garcia said. "You have brought me joy as well."

CHAPTER THREE

Garcia was disappointed that he would not be able to attend the hearing convening to investigate further the circumstances leading to Joshua Alberts' death. His own hearing was about to convene in the chambers directly across from Alberts. Locarno nodded to Garcia across the corridor and then turned his attention back to the others, including Jaxa and Wes. Neither Wes nor Jaxa met his eyes. He could imagine why Jaxa was avoiding eye contact with him, but hadn't a clue why Wes would do so. He had to shrug off his empathy for them and enter the chamber where his own trial would soon commence.

He approached the defense table, removed his jacket, hung it over the back of the chair, and sat down. His table was clean and free of clutter. The opposing counsel's table, on the other hand, had a number of legal PADDs, and archaic writing utensils and paper. Apparently, there was no replacement for good old pencils and paper, even though several of the PADDs offered styluses and could do everything the pencil and paper could, and better. One of the prosecuting counselors nudged the higher ranked person, who was busy reading over some files. She raised her head and looked over to Garcia. She put her PADD down, stood, and approached Garcia, extending her hand.

"I am Captain Palmer," she introduced herself.

Garcia didn't extend his hand.

"I see no reason to be less than civil," Captain Palmer said.

"And I see no reason to be less than adversarial, considering the nature of this meeting," Garcia said.

Captain Palmer withdrew her hand. "You did not respond to the query I sent you."

"I am under no obligation to respond to any of your queries outside of this hearing," Garcia said.

"It could have saved the court's time and resources," Captain Palmer said.

"Where is your legal counsel?"

"I'm he," Garcia said, flashing an insincere, but bold smile.

"I don't believe you understand the gravity of this hearing," Captain Palmer said.

"It's a preliminary trial to discover if a court martial is warranted," Garcia said.

"Which could result in me being dismissed from the Academy and barred from serving in Star Fleet."

"And jail time," Captain Palmer said. "We could have worked a deal."

"I don't do deals or special favors," Garcia said. "I will face whatever punishment a jury of my peers decides is necessary, out here in the open, not behind some closed door or inner sanctum," Garcia said.

Captain Palmer was about to respond to that when the bailiff entered and asked for everyone to rise. Admiral Seager, Vice Admiral Parris, and Admiral Pressman entered, in that order. The judges remained standing until the last juror was in place and then they sat in their respective chairs. After the completion of compulsory rituals, the opposing counsels and the jury were invited to sit.

"Your honor, may I approach?" Captain Palmer asked.

"Stand by," Vice Admiral Paris said. He scrutinized Garcia, hoping to elicit some sort of reaction. Garcia didn't even blink. He sat calmly in his chair, elbows on the arm

rest, hands clasped, with his index fingers steepled. "Ensign Garcia. Am I to understand correctly that you are waving your right to counsel?"

"You understand correctly," Garcia agreed. "Your honor."

Vice Admiral Paris pursed his lips. "I will not compel you to reconsider, but if I find you are trivializing this process, or making a mockery of these proceedings, it will weigh heavy against you. I will not award any mistrials based on your ignorance of the law or inability to present your case from lack of experience."

"I understand, your honor," Garcia said.

"Very well," Paris said. "Captain Palmer?"

"Your honor," Captain Palmer said, standing. She retrieved a PADD from the table and touched a button to transfer information to the respective judges and the jury who all had PADD's of their own. "Ensign Tammis Garcia, present with us today, is responsible for the destruction of the USS Philadelphia Freedom, and consequently the loss of lives of his fellow shipmates during the committing of that act..."

"Your honor," Garcia interrupted.

"Excuse me," Captain Palmer said. "I have the floor."

"I thought you were all about saving the court time and resources?" Garcia asked her. "Your honor, if you will permit me to speak on these first two points, since she seems to be dividing them into two separate points."

"This is not a trial, Ensign," Vice Admiral Paris said. "This is not the time or place to deliberate points of contention."

"Except when it is a matter of public record," Garcia said. "I have openly admitted to setting the self destruct sequence on the Philadelphia Freedom, allowing it to proceed through to its end, fully aware that there would be some crew who would not escape that end. So, if it saves the court time, I'm guilty of doing this."

Captain Palmer flashed a smile at her team, and then gave a guarded look at the judges, knowing full well that Garcia had just made her case. When the judge didn't say anything, Garcia continued to hang himself.

"Further, I believe the court has in its possession an investigative report provided by Captains Picard and Munoz, and Lt Commanders Riker and Osaka," Garcia said.

"This is not the time to put forth a defense," Captain Palmer said.

"I can run my own court, thank you, Captain," Vice Admiral Parris said.

"I'm not presenting it as a defense," Garcia corrected. "I am asking the court to consider the teams report when making their decision on whether or not I should face a trial."

"You honor," Captain Palmer said. "Garcia has a track record of avoiding the consequences of his actions due to the influence of people in authority."

"How dare you!" Garcia snapped, standing up.

"Oh, everyone knows your McCoy's son," Captain Palmer said. "And that you are regarded highly by T'Pau of Vulcan."

"You honor, what happened to this not being a trial, but rather a preliminary hearing?" Garcia asked. "I asked that you ignore her words. I stand or fall on my own merit."

"That will be quite enough from both of you," Vice Admiral Paris said.

"Your honor, may I be allowed to continue?" Captain Palmer asked.

"You may," Vice Admiral Paris said. "Sit down, Ensign Garcia."

Garcia sat down allowing Captain Palmer to continue. She passed a triumphant smirk to him that only he could see, as if she were challenging him. "In addition to blowing up the ship and killing ship mates, his recklessness planetside not only reigned death and destruction down on the poor, Iotian people, but we can prove that he violated the Prime Directive."

"Poor Iotians, indeed," Garcia said, scoffing. "They're anything but poor."

"Ensign Garcia, you will refrain from interrupting the prosecuting attorney," Vice Admiral Parris said.

"Your honor, I saved the Iotians from eminent extinction," Garcia said.

"The word isn't extinction. The word is genocide. And there would have been no threat at all to the Iotians had you not enabled agents that put Iotia at risk," Captain Palmer countered.

"Enabled? I didn't enable anyone," Garcia said. "It was Brock who gave the Iotians the formula which led to the making of the bomb."

"And it was the capital you generated that was used to create the bomb, and it was you who changed the balance of power that allowed Mann to stage a successful coup," Captain Palmer said.

"I don't remember anyone complaining when Kirk consolidated the Iotians under one government, which effectively stifled all growth potential," Garcia said.

"So, you admit to changing the balance of power on that planet to stir things up?" Captain Palmer demanded.

"I didn't say that," Garcia said.

Vice Admiral Paris rang the bell on his desk. "That will be enough," Paris said. "Both of you sit down."

"Your honor," Garcia said, quietly. "May I speak?"

"I think you've said enough," Vice Admiral Paris said. "The court finds that there is sufficient evidence to commence with a court martial. This meeting is adjourned. Garcia, I want to see you in my office."

"Your honor, I would like to be present while you meet with Garcia," Captain Palmer said.

"Request denied," Paris said. "You, Ensign. With me. Now."

Garcia followed Vice Admiral Paris back to his office. The office was quite typical of a modern office, clean of clutter. There was a small collection of hard cover books. There were pictures of Paris and cadets, no doubt taken during graduation. A photo of McCoy and Paris together at a ribbon cutting ceremony held Garcia's interest for moment before he moved on to what appeared to be family pics. Garcia did a double take, identifying Locarno in one of the family shots.

"Locarno is a friend of your family?" Garcia asked.

"Locarno is my son," Paris said.

Garcia was taken aback. "I don't get it?"

"I'm sure you understand just fine," Paris said. "Locarno changed his name before entering the academy so as to avoid being treated differently by his peers because his father is a Vice Admiral."

"Surely that's a hard fact to suppress," Garcia said.

"I'm sure there are people who know. How many people know you're the son of McCoy?" Paris asked.

Garcia bit his tongue to keep from saying something sarcastic.

"I didn't call you back here to discuss my family," Vice Admiral Paris said. "You need to know that your relationship with McCoy will have no bearing on the outcome of this trial."

"That's how it should be," Garcia said.

"McCoy has been a dear friend to me for a long time," Paris went on. "I will not have his reputation tarnished because you're too prideful to seek out legal representation. If your behavior today is any indication of what is to come, you're going to lose. And I guarantee you that McCoy, T'Pol, or even Spock himself, will not be able to get you out of this."

"Ironical, isn't it?" Garcia asked. "On the one hand, you're admonishing me for defending myself, and yet, on the other hand, you threaten that my greatest advocates can't do anything for me."

"I want you to consider taking the deal Captain Palmer offered," Paris said. "If you do that, we could temper the punishment to make it less severe. Maybe even save your Star Fleet career."

Garcia stood up. "Is that all?" Garcia asked.

"I think it's a fair offer," Vice Admiral Paris said.

"And I think I would rather just take a public beating," Garcia said. "Because if you think I've been coddled all this time, just imagine the rumors that will be generated by me sneaking out the back door on a pass. No, you go ahead and have your little trial."

"Dismissed," Paris said.

Garcia departed, roundabout way that took him back through the courtroom he had been assigned to. He came out in the corridor as the investigation into the death of Joshua was taking a recess. Locarno was leading his group away, trying to avoid questions from the gathering crowd. Garcia tried to push through the crowd towards Jaxa, but they were moving too fast. Someone touched Garcia's shoulder, giving him a start. It was Captain Palmer.

"So, what did the Vice Admiral have to say?" Captain Palmer asked.

Garcia looked to Jaxa and back to Palmer and decided to let Jaxa go. Captain Picard and Doctor Crusher emerged from the room, noted Garcia, and approached.

"He asked me to accept your plea bargain," Garcia told her.

"Really?" Captain Palmer asked.

"Ensign," Captain Picard said.

"Captain Picard," Garcia said. "This is Captain Palmer. Captain Palmer, Captain Picard and Doctor Crusher."

"Pleasure," Palmer said.

"So, how did your thing go?" Doctor Crusher asked.

"Went fine. We'll be holding a court martial," Garcia said.

"I am sorry to hear that," Picard said. "Tell me you picked Captain Palmer here to represent you."

"You know me?" Palmer asked.

"Only by reputation. That you haven't lost a trial yet," Picard said.

"Lovely," Garcia said. "If you'll excuse me. I have a choir rehearsal I need to attend."



After choir practice, Garcia took a scenic route home, no end to his ruminating over thoughts, things he should have said or should have said better. Rivan greeted him eagerly and invited him to meet a quest that had been anxiously awaiting his return. Kletsova and Trini were there, looking smug as if they had a present for him. Garcia puzzled over the alien's species. If it weren't for the ridges cresting the alien's forehead, he might have been just another human.

"This is Norik," Rivan said. "He's a Trill."

Garcia shook the man's hand. "Norik. Nice to meet you."

"Is that the best I'm going to get?" Norik asked. "After all that we've been through together? Life? Death? And life again?"

Garcia tightened his grip on Norik's hand as a realization started to bubble its way up into his conscious. "Lenar?!" Garcia asked.

Norik nodded. The two embraced and Garcia openly cried. Garcia finally pushed himself away and sat down on the couch. Rivan sat next to him, holding Garcia's hand.

"Isn't it amazing," Rivan asked. "They took the Trill that was in Lenar's body and put it into Norik's body. He has all the memories of Lenar, so it's just as if Lenar didn't die."

"Well, no, not really," Norik said. "Lenar did die. We must mourn and move on."

"So, what happens now?" Garcia asked. "Are you going to re-apply to the Academy? Maybe try and get through it without you or the Trill dying?"

"No," Norik said. "I can't be in Star Fleet while in this host."

"I don't understand," Garcia said.

"The neural connections between symbiant and host for this particular host species is too delicate to allow transport," Norik explained. "It's just a peculiarity of this species. And, though I am sure I could find a place in Star Fleet where my exposure to being transported could be minimized, transporting is just too much a big part of the job to try and get around."

"I see," Garcia said. "So, if you had a host with dots, you could transport, but if you have host with ridges, you can't transport."

"Pretty much," Norik said. "But I wouldn't let it dampen your spirits any. I've got some exciting prospects ahead of me. I was thinking of becoming a teacher. They are looking for someone with my talents on Alpha Carinae V."

"That's a bit of a back water place," Kletsova said.

"A bit ethnocentric, are you?" Norik asked.

"I just don't understand people who limit the use of technology," Kletsova said.

"Technology isn't always a good thing," Norik said.

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Trini said.

"Before I left, I thought I would help you find a replacement room mate," Norik offered.

"We have to interview for our replacements, as well. Poor Tam is going to be here all on his own if we don't find him some suitable room mates," Trini said. "Cadets to look after him and keep him out of trouble."

"We'll still be here," Rivan assured them, patting her stomach. "It would be great if you could stay with us, Norik. Baby needs an uncle."

"You are so kind to include me in your family," Norik said.

“You are all my family,” Rivan reaffirmed.

“Speaking of family, Afu didn’t make it?” Norik asked

Garcia shook his head. “Maybe while you’re here, we should go through your room, and his,” Garcia said. “You might want something.”

“I don’t want anything,” Norik assured them. “Send Afu’s stuff to his family, or recycle it.”

“So, how did the prelim go?” Kletsova asked Garcia in an effort to change the subject, hitting him on the leg.

“It’s official,” Garcia said. “They’re going to try and court martial me.”

“Oh, dear,” Norik said. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Not really,” Garcia said.

“Have you heard anything about investigation into Joshua’s death?” Norik asked.

“No. Should I have?” Garcia asked.

“Well, you and Jaxa seemed pretty tight,” Norik said. “Thought maybe she would have given you the inside scoop.”

“She and I really aren’t speaking to each other at the moment,” Garcia said, shrugging. Ambassador Clemens hopped up into Garcia’s lap and started to purr.

“That cat sure does like you,” Norik said.

“Yeah. You want to take it with you?” Garcia asked.

“Oh!” Rivan cried, empathizing with the cat. She petted the cat. “How could you say that? He loves you.” She said “he loves you” in a baby voice as she petted it.

“Why does everyone raise the pitch of their voice when they speak to animals?” Garcia asked. “It’s not a baby.”

“It’s my cat,” Trini said, feigning jealousies. “Don’t be trying to give it away.”

Garcia allowed the others to carry the conversation where they willed, all the while petting the cat. He observed the subtleties in Norik’s mannerism and knew that this person was not Lenar. True, Lenar’s memories were in there, but this was just not Lenar. That friendship was gone, forever, and there was no point in trying to force his idea of Lenar on this poor Norik fellow. Norik would be a good teacher and probably quite happy in the pastoral settings Cairnae V would offer.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Captain Picard," Captain Palmer said. "Would you describe for the court the first time you encountered Tammias Garcia."

"I object, your honor," Garcia protested. "Her query is irrelevant."

"I'm asking for discretionary relevance," Palmer said.

"Unfair prejudice!" Garcia said. "Which not only has the potential of misleading the jury and confusing the issues, it's a complete waste of time."

"I think it's important," Captain Palmer said. "It reveals a history and pattern that is extremely relevant in evaluating what sort of Officer Garcia is, or would be."

"Your honor, I was a child and those records..."

"Are public," Captain Palmer pressed on.

"Not to you, they aren't," Garcia said. "Yes, my file on Vulcan is available to the general public, but only because Vulcan holds a different perspective on such matters. They would not, like you, try to use something from my past, my childhood, against me. To use this information the way you're about to is unethical."

"Unethical? And releasing a virus on the Vulcan Security Nets is ethical?" Captain Palmer asked, working in the detail she was planning to bring out.

"How dare you!" Garcia said, standing. "I want that stricken from the records, your honor. I was a minor, out of this court's jurisdiction and..."

"You set off emergency and security alerts on every ship in the Vulcan system, causing havoc on three Star Fleet vessels, which makes it an interstellar crime," Captain Palmer said.

"If Star Fleet had a problem with what I did as a kid, then they should have petitioned or sanctioned me at the time of the incident, not now," Garcia said.

"Had you not been shielded by T'Pol, maybe we would have," Captain Palmer said.

"Objection," Garcia said.

"Objection sustain," Vice Admiral Paris said. "You'll refrain from discussing this matter."

Garcia sat down. Captain Palmer smiled a little, acknowledging Garcia's victory. A small victory. The jury still had the information in their minds. Yes, they were Star Fleet Officers, and they would disregard it, but it would always be in the back of their minds. And it could go either way. Some may find his youthful endeavor humorous and consequently go lightly on him, but it would have been better had it not been brought up at all.

"Captain, what's your opinion of Ensign Garcia?" Captain Palmer.

"Objection, your honor," Garcia said. "Opinion is irrelevant."

"Really?" Captain Palmer said. "You didn't seem to mind the opinions provided by the preliminary investigative report which Picard signed."

"Hello? The report gave the opinions context," Garcia said.

"Objection sustained," Vice Admiral Paris said.

"Are you friends with Garcia?" Captain Palmer said.

"Objection!" Garcia snapped. "Are you like brand new at this? Stop wasting the court's time on warm fuzzies and get to the meat of your argument, if you have any."

Paris rang the bell to bring some decorum back to the room.

"Your honor, if she doesn't have any legit questions for Captain Picard, I respectfully ask that you allow him to step down," Garcia said.

"Captain Palmer? Will you move this along, please," Paris said.

"Yes, your honor," Captain Palmer said. "The Enterprise responded to an emergency involving the USS Chance."

"Yes," Picard said.

"And Garcia was one of the survivors you helped rescue?" Captain Palmer asked.

"He was," Picard said.

"And how did he repay you?" Captain Palmer said.

"I don't think I understand the question," Picard said.

"Did he thank you?" Captain Palmer asked.

"It wasn't necessary," Captain Picard said. "We were doing our duty."

"He repaid you by incapacitating you and your crew and stealing a shuttlecraft," Captain Palmer said.

"Objection, your honor," Garcia said. "That matter has been settled."

"Like the Vulcan computer virus incident was settled?" Captain Palmer asked.

"Do you expect everyone to cover up for you?"

"You are out of line," Garcia said.

"Picard went lightly on you for the theft because you're old friends," Palmer said.

"That's nonsense," Garcia said. "Picard and I aren't friends and no one covered up the fact that I stole a shuttle or that I incapacitated the crew of the Enterprise."

"If I may," Captain Picard said.

"You, sir, are a menace. Your recklessness almost got Janeway killed by prolonging her stay onboard the USS Chance, you endangered the lives of those on the Enterprise when you incapacitated them using Kelvan technology, you stole Star Fleet property, namely, an Enterprise Shuttlecraft, and came very near to starting an interstellar war with the Romlans."

"Had it not been for my actions, there would have been more than a war," Garcia said.

"Really? Are you that arrogant to think that you alone must save the Universe?" Palmer asked.

"I think the record shows, I did save the Universe, as we know it, thank you very much," Garcia said, raising his voice to be heard over the bell.

"May I?" Picard said.

"You really are full of yourself, aren't you?" Palmer said.

"And I didn't do it alone," Garcia added. "Picard was there. He played a role in preserving your way of life."

"More like he played a role in cleaning up your mess," Palmer said.

Paris pounded the bell until there was silence. "Thank you," Paris said.

"Garcia was under the influence of alien programming," Captain Picard said. "The program was downloaded into his brain while accessing Kelvan technology, which he did on my orders."

"Perhaps," Captain Palmer said. "Or, maybe Garcia just used that as an excuse to fulfill his own agenda."

"Objection," Garcia said.

"Sustained," Paris said.

“No more questions, your honor,” Palmer.

“Garcia, your witness,” Vice Admiral Paris said.

Garcia sat down, retrieved a worry stone and began rolling it in his hand.

“Garcia, hand that to the bailiff,” Paris said.

Garcia handed the stone to the bailiff, who in turn handed the stone to Vice Admiral Paris. Admiral Paris examined the object.

“It’s just a stone,” Garcia said.

“I expect you to take this trial seriously,” Vice Admiral Paris said, putting the stone away. “No toys.”

Garcia sighed, clenched his fist, and visibly relaxed. “You know, Captain Picard, Captain Palmer is right about one thing. I am remiss in one particular duty, and a necessary one. Thank you for saving my life.”

“You’re quite welcome,” Captain Picard said.

“No further questions, your honor,” Garcia said.

Captain Palmer called Counselor Troi to the stand. After the obligatory ceremonial introduction, Counselor Troi sat down and placed her right hand on the biometric reader on the arm of her chair. The computer acknowledged her.

“Would you give us a professional opinion of Garcia’s state of psychological well being?” Captain Palmer asked.

“Objection,” Garcia interrupted.

“Of course,” Captain Palmer said, not lacking any histrionics. “What, you don’t want the court to hear her opinion of you?”

“My psych profile has already been provided to the court,” Garcia said.

“Yeah, and now I am asking her again,” Captain Palmer said. “Do you mind?”

“Your honor, Captain Palmer’s theatrics are a waste of our time. I motion that the case be dismissed so we can get on with our lives,” Garcia said.

“Motion denied,” Vice Admiral Paris said. “The witness will answer the question.”

“What was the question?” Counselor Troi asked.

“How is Garcia’s psychological health?” Captain Palmer asked.

“He has no more issues than any one else,” Counselor Troi said.

“You wouldn’t say that he has the same mental issues that lead to an inability to maintain social connections that Tam Elbrum has?” Captain Palmer asked.

“Objection,” Garcia said, rolling his eyes. “Comparisons are irrelevant. Everyone stands on their own merits.”

“I think it’s very relevant. You’re adversarial...” Captain Palmer began.

“Hello, I am on trial,” Garcia said. “Naturally I am going to be a bit adversarial. Not like we’re here to be social. Perhaps a spot of tea, Earl Grey?” Garcia asked.

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you,” Captain Palmer said.

“Nor do these games become you,” Garcia said. “It all comes out so contrived and meaningless.”

“You’re also insolent and have delusions of grandeur,” Captain Palmer pointed out.

“Did you come up with that on your own, or did you pick it up through the grapevine?” Garcia asked.

“I make my own conclusions, thank you,” Captain Palmer said.

“Excuse me,” Vice Admiral Paris interrupted. “We’re not here to listen to the two of you bicker. Please proceed with the questioning, Captain.”

“Yes, your honor. How long have you been friends with Garcia?” Captain Palmer asked Troi.

“Objection,” Garcia said.

“What, you don’t want the court to know that you’ve been in therapy with Counselor Troi since you were seven?” Captain Palmer asked.

“Objection!” Garcia protested louder.

“Sustained,” Vice Admiral Paris said.

“What is a multiple personality disorder?” Captain Palmer asked.

“Oh, please. Objection,” Garcia said.

“Objection? It’s a perfectly legit request,” Captain Palmer said. “She’s a counselor. She probably has encountered the phenomena, once or twice in her career.”

“You know exactly why I am objecting,” Garcia said.

“Your honor, there is no reason for Counselor Troi to avoid the question,” Captain Palmer said.

“Objection over ruled. The witness will answer the question,” Vice Admiral Paris said.

Counselor Troi gave the definition of multiple personality disorder, which was perfect and exact. Captain Palmer smiled, not perturbed.

“What would the difference be between schizophrenia and multiple personality disorders?” Captain Palmer asked.

Counselor Troi answered the question, again, very specific and to the point.

“So,” Captain Palmer said. “Which of the two does Garcia have?”

“He has neither,” Counselor Troi said.

“Really? Think very carefully on the definitions you provided the court. Garcia has shown signs of talking to himself and admits to having hallucinations. So, is he a schizophrenic or isn’t he?” Captain Palmer asked.

“For lack of better terms, Garcia does have several extra personalities existing simultaneously in his brain, but that doesn’t mean you can confuse what he is experiencing with a multiple personality disorder. Since the hallucinations are not the manifestation of a diseased brain, he is not, by definition, schizophrenic,” Counselor Troi said. “I’ll stake my reputation on that.”

“By your on admission, he sees and hears things that no one else can see,” Captain Palmer said. “And, he meets the definitions for both illnesses you provided the court.”

“Yes, but,” Counselor Troi began.

“Does Garcia have a neural implant?” Captain Palmer asked, interrupting Troi.

“Yes,” Counselor Troi answered.

“And is it true that this implant’s primary function is to reduce symptoms of chronic depression?” Captain Palmer asked.

“No,” Counselor Troi said.

“But, that’s why he got the implant in the first place, right?” Captain Palmer said.

“It’s a tool that aids in regulating his neural chemicals,” Counselor Troi said.

“Right, keeps him from getting depressed,” Captain Palmer said.

“No,” Counselor Troi said. “He regulates his own moods and feelings...”

"That will be all," Captain Palmer cut Troi off short.

"Your witness," Vice Admiral Paris said.

"No questions, your honor," Garcia said.

Deanna Troi stood, giving Garcia one of those looks that said she was expecting to be questioned. He could almost hear her say so in his mind, but his shields were up fairly tight as he was pushing down his emotions. Doctor Crusher was called to the stand.

"Excuse me," Garcia interrupted. "But don't you want to interview the people that were involved with the Philadelphia Freedom and Iotia incidents?"

"In a hurry?" Captain Palmer said.

Garcia leaned back in his chair. "Guess not," he said.

"Doctor Crusher, what is your medical opinion of Garcia?"

"He is an extremely healthy young man," Crusher said.

"Extremely?" Captain Palmer asked. "Compared to..." she offered a hand as if calling Crusher to help her finish her statement.

"If there were a medical textbook of a perfect human being, Garcia would get top billing," Crusher said.

"Explain that. Was he genetically modified?" Captain Palmer said.

"Yes and no," Crusher said.

"Yes or no. Which is it, Doctor?" Captain Palmer said.

"Garcia isn't the byproduct of some Eugenic program, such as Kahn was," Crusher said. "When the original Kelvan settled the planet Kirk gave them, they kept their text book perfect bodies, the ones they created using their technology. McCoy considered them textbook perfect because they lacked miscellaneous junk DNA and RNA. Garcia wasn't created, as they were, by a computer manifesting the parts from scratch. Rather, he was one of millions of cultured experiments, where bits of stolen reproductive materials combined in test tubes were allowed to fully develop. The best of each generation were taken, allowed to mature to adulthood, while the others were culled from existence, and from this batch the process was started over. In this manner the Kelvan proceeded until they had the results that they wanted: Garcia."

"To what ends?" Captain Palmer asked.

"The Kelvans wanted to create a human who could become a Kelvan," Doctor Crusher said. "A human who could use their technology."

"And they were successful?" Captain Palmer asked.

"He can use Kelvan technology, and though I did not witness it, I heard that Garcia transformed into a Kelvan," Crusher said.

"What is he?" Captain Palmer asked.

"I don't understand the question," Crusher said.

"Who or what is Tammis Garcia? Is he human? Is he Kelvan?" Captain Palmer asked.

"Biologically speaking, he is a Human Vulcan hybrid, with Kelvan mental imprinting," Crusher said. "He's just Tammis Garcia."

"Do you concur with Counselor Troi's assessment of him?" Captain Palmer asked.

"I trust her opinion," Crusher said.

"If he's mentally sound, why does he still have an implant?" Captain Palmer said.

“He’s had it so long it’s a part of him,” Doctor Crusher said. “I might as well ask you to give up your right hand. He uses it mostly for data retrieval and biofeedback practice.”

“But it also monitors for chemical imbalances and makes corrections, right?” Captain Palmer said.

“It does monitor,” Doctor Crusher agreed. “And, it can correct minor imbalances in his neural chemistry if necessary. Garcia has learned to regulate his own neural chemistry, though, through the use of the biofeedback features of his implant, so that he does not require medical assists to maintain a balanced temperament.”

“So, balanced mental health is something Garcia struggles with? He has to make a conscious go at it everyday?” Captain Palmer asked.

“Doesn’t everyone?” Doctor Crusher asked.

“No,” Captain Palmer said. “Most people don’t even think about it, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I would say that people who don’t consistently and actively pursue their own health, mentally and physically, are more subject to external factors being in control, and are more likely to experience extremes,” Doctor Crusher said.

“Would you say Garcia has an addictive personality?” Captain Palmer asked.

“No,” Doctor Crusher said.

“But he does spend quite a lot of time on the holodeck, doesn’t he? More than the average person?” Captain Palmer asked. “Obsessive amounts of time?”

Garcia yawned as if he were bored.

“I think his time is balanced between play and learning activities,” Doctor Crusher.

“But more than most people?” Captain Palmer pressed.

“More than most,” Doctor Crusher admitted.

“Have you ever treated Ensign Garcia for injuries?” Captain Palmer said.

“Objection,” Garcia said. “Irrelevant.”

“Over ruled,” Vice Admiral Paris said.

“Yes,” Doctor Crusher answered. “He was treated for injuries sustained during the evacuation of the Chance.”

“Yes, but beyond that. Was he ever seen in sickbay for miscellaneous injuries?” Captain Palmer asked.

“He injured himself while on the holodeck,” Doctor Crusher said.

“Could you elaborate, please,” Captain Palmer requested.

“Could you be more specific?” Doctor Crusher asked.

“Well, people probably get bruises and stuff all the time on the holodeck. What did you treat Garcia for?” Captain Palmer asked.

“Laceration to the forehead, concussion, broken left fibula, broken right femur, broken intercostals ribs, compound fracture to the right ulna, hairline fracture of the left humerus, replaced the fingernails on his right hand, ruptured spleen, lacerations to the face and...” Doctor Crusher said.

“Whoa, that’s sufficient, Doctor,” Captain Palmer said. “What happened? Was he in a shuttle accident?”

“No,” Doctor Crusher said.

“No?” Captain Palmer asked. “Was he saving someone from a wild polar bear?”

“No,” Doctor Crusher said.

“Well?” Captain Palmer said.

“He disengaged the safety protocols on the holodeck,” Doctor Crusher said.

“Which isn’t an unusual thing, I might add.”

“Yes, perhaps. But how many people disengage the safety protocols and then try running across the top of a moving train?” Captain Palmer asked. “Ever treated anyone for that before?”

“No,” Doctor Crusher said.

“And you still agree with Counselor Troi’s assessment of Garcia?” Captain Palmer asked.

“Yes,” Doctor Crusher said.

“Did Garcia ever tell you he was having hallucinations?” Captain Palmer said.

“Not at first,” Doctor Crusher said.

“Oh? When did he finally tell you he was experiencing hallucinations?” Captain Palmer asked.

“After a failed mind meld with Data,” Doctor Crusher said.

“Excuse me? Garcia tried to mind meld with a machine? Is that possible?” Captain Palmer asked.

“I’m not an expert in the field of telepathy, but I wouldn’t rule it out as a possibility,” Doctor Crusher said. “Spock was telepathically aware of V-Ger and that was a machine.”

“So, how did the mind meld work?” Captain Palmer asked.

“Data linked to Garcia’s mind via his neural implant, they began sharing information, there was a glitch, probably due to the rogue alien program operating in Garcia’s mind, and Garcia lost consciousness,” Doctor Crusher said.

“He nearly died, didn’t he?” Captain Palmer said.

“Yes,” Doctor Crusher said.

“But he had a backup plan and medical aide standing by, correct?” Captain Palmer asked.

“No,” Doctor Crusher said.

“What was he hoping to gain by all of this?” Captain Palmer asked.

“He was trying to find an explanation for his hallucinations,” Doctor Crusher said.

“Why do you suppose he didn’t confide in you that he was having problems?” Captain Palmer asked.

“Objection,” Garcia said. “Leading the witness to speculate.”

“Sustained,” Vice Admiral Paris said.

“Sorry,” Captain Palmer said, flashing a smile at Garcia. “If a cadet comes to you to report having hallucinations, what would happen?”

“They’re taken off active duty and extensive mental health evaluations ensue,” Doctor Crusher said. “But since there’s nothing wrong with Garcia’s state of mental health...”

“Thank you, that will be all,” Captain Palmer interrupted.

“Your witness,” Vice Admiral Paris handed Crusher over to Garcia.

“No questions, your honor,” Garcia said.

Doctor Crusher frowned as she left the stand, hoping Garcia would have asked her something. She walked by him as she exited and patted him on the shoulder.

"I'd like to call Captain Janeway to the stand," Captain Palmer requested.

"Okay, that's enough," Garcia said.

"Excuse me?" Captain Palmer said.

"Your honor, this court martial is supposed to be about the destruction of the Philadelphia Freedom and possible violations of the Prime Directive while on Iotia. Janeway was not there. This tangent that Captain Palmer is taking us on has been entertaining, but it's taken us too far from our goal," Garcia protested.

"Your honor," Captain Palmer said, patiently. "This is more than just a court martial for blowing up a ship and violating the prime directive, which either offense alone is sufficient to warrant severe penalties. The court and jury's decision is whether or not Tammis Parkin Arblaster Garcia is fit to be a Star Fleet Officer. The evidence I present will comprehensively and overwhelmingly demonstrate that not only is he not fit to be an officer, but that it would be a travesty to allow him to go any further than he has without publicly risking injury to Star Fleet's reputation, as well as putting the public at risk of death and mayhem."

"Oh, that's just rich," Garcia said. "Did you bring your suspenders?"

"I beg your pardon?" Captain Palmer asked.

"Well, if you're going to grand stand, you might as well pop your suspenders while you're at it," Garcia said.

"That will be enough of the sarcasm," Vice Admiral Paris said.

"Your honor, this case is about one thing, well, two things: issues concerning potential prime directive violations, and whether or not the destruction of the Philadelphia Freedom was justifiable," Garcia said. "Captain Palmer knows she's going to lose the case if we simply focus on me destroying the Philadelphia Freedom, so she is trying to mix issues."

"Your honor, Garcia has been with Fleet only a short time and already he has seen two ships destroyed and has caused several incidents at the Academy," Captain Palmer said.

"Like what?" Garcia asked.

"Like beating up fellow students?" Captain Palmer said.

"It was a sparring match," Garcia protested.

"That required medics to treat everyone but you," Captain Palmer said.

"Objection! Unnecessary tangent," Garcia said.

"Fine. What about your little disappearing act while on the training exercise?" Captain Palmer asked. "Star Fleet spent thousands of man hours searching for you, and a week later you show up at a resort in Australia."

"I was lost at sea," Garcia said.

"Prove it," Captain Palmer said.

"That's enough," Vice Admiral Paris said. "Ensign Garcia, we would like to hear from Captain Janeway."

"Lovely," Garcia said. "In the interest of saving the court time, why don't I just go out side and stand on the track for the high-speed tram to facilitate this railroading."

"That will be enough of that," Vice Admiral Paris said.

"Or what? You'll bore me with more interviews?" Garcia said.

"One more word from you, and you'll be spending a night in detention," Vice Admiral Paris said.

“And that’s a deterrent how?” Garcia asked.

“One night in detention, to start after we conclude here today. Now, want to make it two nights?” Vice Admiral Paris asked.

“Why not?” Garcia asked.

“Done. You want to make it the weekend as well?” Vice Admiral Paris asked.

“Only if it gets me out of conducting the concert at the graduation ceremony,” Garcia said.

“You got the weekend, too, but no reprieve on your obligations,” Vice Admiral Paris said. “Now, are you through?”

“Apparently,” Garcia said and sat down.

“Excuse me?” Vice Admiral Paris.

“By all means, continue,” Garcia said.

As Janeway was sworn in, Garcia unfolded a stick of gum from his sleeve and popped it in his mouth. Vice Admiral Paris rang the bell.

“Garcia, get rid of the gum,” Vice Admiral Paris said.

“You’re joking, right?” Garcia asked.

“Now,” Vice Admiral Paris said.

Garcia removed the gum from his mouth, closed it in the foil wrapper, and set it on the desk. He leaned back in his chair and brought his hands together, as if praying. He barely heard the questions Captain Palmer was asking Janeway.

“Okay. Here’s the situation. The Chance is about ready to blow up and you gave the order to abandon ship. Everyone got up to leave, right?” Captain Palmer asked.

“No,” Janeway said. “Garcia asked to remain behind in order to facilitate the evacuations.”

“So, that was the first time he disobeyed a direct order,” Captain Palmer pointed out.

“He didn’t disobey,” Janeway said.

“You don’t just give the order to abandon the ship lightly,” Captain Palmer said. “You knew the ship was likely to go at any moment, right?”

“Yes,” Captain Janeway said. “But I agreed with his assessment. We still had a job to do. We stayed and did it.”

“You mean, you and Garcia stayed. You had the rest of the Bridge evacuate. Your judgment and experience over ruled his, and yet, he caused you to hesitate. In doing so, he ultimately put his and your life in jeopardy. You told everyone to evacuate, he delayed you. That was the first time. He disobeyed a second time, too, didn’t he?”

“No,” Janeway said.

“Excuse me? Video logs of the incident show you grabbing him up from the chair and forcing him towards the exit,” Captain Palmer said. “Do you want me to play the video for the court to refresh your memory?”

“He was caught up in the moment,” Janeway said. “I was helping him focus.”

“He nearly got you killed,” Captain Palmer said. “Do you always make excuses for negligent officers?”

“Objection!” Garcia said. “That’s just meanness.”

“Not the appropriate legal jargon, but objection sustained,” Admiral Paris said.

“No more questions, your honor,” Captain Palmer said.

“Your witness,” Vice Admiral Paris said.

"No questions, your honor," Garcia said.

"Your honor, I would like to say something to the court," Captain Janeway said.

"You've been dismissed," Captain Palmer said, glancing over a legal PADD, purposely avoiding eye contact with Janeway.

"Vice Admiral Paris, I am going to say something before I leave the stand and I would prefer it be sanctioned and on the record, but either way, I will be heard," Captain Janeway said.

"Your honor, both counsels have finished with this witness," Captain Palmer said.

"You wanted to hear from me, by god, you're going to hear from me," Captain Janeway said.

"You may speak your peace, Captain Janeway," Vice Admiral Paris said.

"Thank you, your honor," Captain Janeway said. "If anyone cares to review the latest reports on the destruction of the USS Chance, you will clearly see that one hundred and two lives saved can be directly attributed to Garcia maintaining his post. That's something to brag about."

"He was doing his job," Captain Palmer said.

"No, his job was finished the first time I order the Bridge evacuated," Janeway said. "He went above and beyond the call of duty on that. And instead of questioning me and bringing that small fact to life, he let it go. Why? It's called humility and that's another quality we like to cultivate in Star Fleet Officers. A quality that is sometimes over looked in our race for better personal scores and performance stats. I am on the record for saying I will serve with this man anytime. That hasn't changed."

Captain Janeway stood, walked over to Garcia and extended her hand. He took it.

"Don't quit," Captain Janeway said.

"Thank you," Garcia said.

"Are you finished?" Captain Palmer asked.

"Yes," Janeway said. "My conscience will allow me to sleep tonight."

"Your honor, perhaps we can break for a recess?" Captain Palmer asked.

"Very well," Vice Admiral Paris said. "The court will take a recess, and reconvene at oh nine hundred hours, Monday, after Graduation Week End."

A short ceremony ensued, standing, sitting, and then everyone was free to get up and go about their business beyond the expectations of court and rituals. Garcia remained seated, not watching the people leave. He could hear some of them talking, like Captain Munoz and one of the officers that had survived the Iotia incident. He toyed with the foil in front of him. Counselor Troi approached him, waving a hand in front of his eyes to see if he was acknowledging any stimulus. He gave her a faint smile.

"You didn't want to ask me any questions?" Counselor Troi teased.

"I don't see the point in all of this," Garcia said. "She's wasting time on irrelevancies."

"She's trying to build a picture of you," Counselor Troi said. "She wants to show the jury that you're not human. That you're out of control. That you have your own ideas of law and justice and that you care very little of rules and social norms. That you have your own agenda and don't have a sense of right, wrong, or being a team player."

"I care about social norms," Garcia said.

"Yeah, but you also like to live on the periphery of normal. You're outside the box most of the time, Tam," Troi said. "You go out of your way to challenge people and

push the boundaries of normal. I'm not saying that's bad, but if comes down to evaluating you as an Officer, most of the jury are going to want predictability. This is not about you blowing up the starship. This is about whether or not people can trust you. And, quite frankly, most people are intimidated by people like you."

"Like me?" Garcia asked for clarification.

"Like you," Troi said. "You're a nonconformist. Part of it is your history, but the bigger part of it is no doubt due to the Kelvan programming. The first five years of your life was an immersion in the twentieth century American ideology, and some of it may have been a prenatal influence considering your telepathic bond. That means that your entire childhood was framed with a certain level of contempt and distrust for governments and organized religions. Part of that is good in the sense it teaches you to be an independent thinker, but part of it is bad because it causes you to want to rebel against authority. This also tends to isolate you. You're not a cowboy and this is not the old west and everyone's not out to get you, so don't let her goad you into saying something you're going to regret. You need to stay calm and demonstrate that you are someone to be trusted and that comes from showing that you trust others."

"I'm trust worthy," Garcia said.

"Of course you are," Troi agreed.

"And I trust other people," Garcia told her.

"And that's why you're sitting up here alone, without representation?" Troi asked. "And that's why you didn't ask us any questions?"

"I'm representing myself because it's the right thing to do," Garcia said. "And I didn't ask you questions because there wasn't anything relevant that you could add to this situation." He pocketed his trash. "Are you going to the graduation ceremony?" Garcia asked her, changing the subject.

"Of course," Troi said.

"If you don't have seats, I would like you to come as my guest. I have five reserved seats, up front," Garcia said. "No better place than to see the spectacle I'm going to make of myself. I gave one to Rivan already, but you can have the remaining four."

"That would be lovely, thank you," Troi said. "And you won't be jealous if I bring Riker?"

"No," Garcia said, chuckling. "I should really give one to Doctor Crusher. Lord knows she earned it."

"I will invite her and Doctor Selar," Troi said. "Shall we do lunch?"

"Another time?" Garcia asked.

Troi raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"I have something I have to do," Garcia said.

"I never thought I would live long enough to hear you refuse to have a meal with me," Troi said.

"I have a prior engagement with these two," Garcia said, pointing behind her. Garcia smiled at the two security officers waiting to take him away.

"If you're ready, we will escort you to your cell," the male security officer said.

"Tam, just go apologize to Vice Admiral Paris," Troi said.

"Are you kidding? And miss out on an opportunity to actually get some sleep?" Garcia asked.

“You can be as stubborn as Riker at times,” Troi said. “What are you trying to prove?”

“I didn’t start this,” Garcia said.

“Yes, you did,” Troi said. “This was completely in your power to avoid. Sometimes I think you like being in trouble.” She shook her head and walked away.

CHAPTER FIVE

From all appearances, Garcia looked perfectly blissful in his cell. He had anticipated reading and answering mail, but someone had been thoughtful enough to block all wireless net connections so he was unable to log on using his implant to do that, or any other potential research, or even just catch up on current events. Apparently, incarceration was meant to be reflection time. So instead of surfing the net, he meditated for a bit and then went to sleep. He slept through the first night, plus six hours. He was awake each time they brought in food, but he didn't stir or answer their questions, nor did he eat any of the meals. After waking from his last sleep, he did some light exercises and then meditated for another six hours until he felt like sleeping again. He was sleeping so soundly when Captain Palmer paid a visit that he didn't hear the detention cell barrier power down.

"Ensign Garcia?" Captain Palmer said, a little louder.

Garcia opened his eyes, confirmed his suspicion, and then closed his eyes again. He didn't budge.

"Are you ignoring me, too?" Captain Palmer asked.

"Yes," Garcia said.

"I spoke to Vice Admiral Paris and he agreed to release you," Captain Palmer said.

Garcia frowned. "Why did you do that?" he asked. "I still have fourteen hours to go."

"I was feeling sorry for you," Captain Palmer said.

"Why?" Garcia asked. "I know how the game is played. I may have lost the round, but I'm a good enough sport to suffer the penalty."

"You haven't eaten any of the meals they brought you," Captain Palmer said.

"I'm not hungry," Garcia said.

"Tam. May I call you Tam? You're going to lose this," Captain Palmer said. "Starving yourself only makes you look masochistic. Your only chance for beating this is to get someone qualified to represent you."

"Please, all precedents and case law are already available through the computer," Garcia said. "All I have to do is follow the prompts. And I'm not completely ignorant of my rights."

"Tam, please," Captain Palmer said. "If you won't at least seek help, take the deal I'm offering. Just walk away from this and call it a learning experience. Something you can put into a book and profit from."

"I'm not walking away from a career in Fleet," Garcia said, looking right at her. "I want this."

"Why? So you can have bragging rights that you were a Star Fleet Officer? You have enough skills to be an officer on a cruise line, or a Doctor. You could even be a commercial pilot. There are lots of other opportunities for you out there. I just don't think this is your best choice," Captain Palmer said. "You're a musician and a poet, but not a Star Fleet Officer. Definitely not a lawyer."

"You've come to preach?" Garcia asked.

"You don't have to listen to me. You're free to go," Captain Palmer said.

Garcia stood up. "Tell me something. Straight up," Garcia said.

"I always shoot straight," Captain Palmer said.

“Everyone dissembles from time to time,” Garcia said.

“Not me,” Captain Palmer said. “I have standards.”

“So do I,” Garcia said. “You’re in 1930 Germany, an SS Officer comes to your door and asks you if you are hiding Jews in your house. Do you lie, or do you tell them they’re in the basement?”

“Nice try, but I don’t play what if games,” Captain Palmer said. “So, what did you want to know?”

“I see no point in pursuing a dialogue,” Garcia said, and headed for the door.

Captain Palmer reached out and touched his arm. “I’m serious, what did you want to ask me?”

“I’m serious, I no longer wish to communicate with you,” Garcia said. “Thank you for getting me out of jail.”

♪♪▶

Jaxa Sito shared a dorm room with Hajar, which was situated on the fourth floor, with a balcony that over looked the Academy’s park. Garcia was fairly certain he saw activity in the main room, so the odds were good that Jaxa was home.

“So, are you going up to see her, or are you just going to think about it?”

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked, turning to see who was speaking to him. He looked down.

The grounds keeper pointed up to Jaxa Sito’s room and repeated his question.

“Do I know you?” Garcia asked him.

“Mr. Boothby,” the grounds keeper said, wiping his hand on his smock before extending it towards Garcia.

Garcia shook his hand, but was still disconcerted. “I’m a bit uncomfortable with your presumption that you know me or my intent, or what I may or may not be deliberating over,” Garcia said.

“Really?” Mr. Boothby said. “I figured a big time celebrity such as your self is rather used to that sort of level of intimacy from strangers. And, you are known for wanting to cut through the fertilizer and get right to the point, so I thought I would save you a little time by just asking you right out. So, are you going up there?”

“I can’t believe I am having this conversation with you,” Garcia said, just totally blown away by his brazenness. All the energy Garcia had been using to deliberate over whether or not he should go up and talk to Jaxa was now rerouted to gauge the level of threat coming from the groundskeeper. Was he really just a simple grounds keeper, or maybe an alien spy out gathering information? But what kind of information? The material he was looking for was tabloid sort and most people in the world had too much to do in their lives to read gossip about others. No, that wasn’t quite true. The reason there was no money in the gossip market any longer was due to the amount of free information a person could get on the net through personal blogs and other type of data dispersal systems. Gossip was just as big a game as it ever was. “I can’t see how that is any of your business.”

“It isn’t,” Mr. Boothby agreed. “You looked like you were stuck and I thought engaging you in conversation might help.”

“Did you hear a distress signal?” Garcia asked.

“Is it compulsory to wait for a distress signal before one sends out a query?” Mr. Boothby asked.

Garcia opened his mouth to answer and then didn't say anything. He and Trini had had this conversation once before. They had found Rivan crying in the park. Garcia's inclination had been to ignore it and go on with his business. Trini had had other ideas. Now Rivan and he were good friends. And expecting a baby. Garcia knelt down so as to be eye level with Mr. Boothby.

"I don't think I like you," Garcia said.

Mr. Boothby laughed. "Is it a prerequisite to us having a conversation?"

"No," Garcia said.

"And since I really didn't need to have that information, why did you feel compelled to share it?" Mr. Boothby asked.

"Who are you?" Garcia asked.

"I'm Mr. Boothby, the groundskeeper," Mr. Boothby said.

"Did you ever see the movie, Being There?" Garcia asked.

"Just how old do you think I am?" Mr. Boothby asked.

"Not important. What is important is that I understand and appreciate that as a groundskeeper you might have some experience and knowledge and can provide some insight into the lives of people through analogies," Garcia began.

"Not about people. About plants," Mr. Boothby said. "You're not a plant. You're a people. So, when I see you deliberating on whether or not you're going to go up, I'm thinking, umm, I don't remember planting this tree here, maybe I should poke it and see if it's a people. You responded to stimulus in a people sort of way."

"Are you going anywhere with this?" Garcia asked, and then rolled his eyes.

"How cliché? This dialogue. This is all craziness. I can't believe I'm still here engaged in a conversation with you. Who are you?"

"We covered that," Mr. Boothby said. "And the reason you're still here talking with me is because you're too busy procrastinating on whether or not you should go up and talk to Jaxa."

"How do you know I'm here to see Jaxa?" Garcia asked.

"Because Rapunzil doesn't live in this tower," Mr. Boothby said. "It's an older reference than your 'Being There' reference. Ha!"

"Funny," Garcia said. "Who've you been talking to?"

"Tammas Garcia, if I'm not mistaken," Mr. Boothby said.

"You're a riot," Garcia said.

"No, I'm a groundskeeper," Boothby said.

"Really. Why did you ask?" Garcia asked. "Has Jaxa been speaking to you? Has she said something to you about me?"

Mr. Boothby gathered his tools, placed them in a box and prepared to stand up. "I asked because I always wanted to speak with Garcia the Great. You just never stood still long enough for me to do so in the past. Nice talking with you."

"That's it?" Garcia said, rising as Mr. Boothby stood.

"Even the greatest of oracles don't always have answers," Mr. Boothby said.

"This is surreal," Garcia said.

"This is life," Mr. Boothby said. "Perhaps we can chat again sometime. When you're not in a hurry. I've really enjoyed this."

"I see that," Garcia said, wanting the last word.

Garcia watched Mr. Boothby as he followed a path. Boothby paused only to examine the flowers he had recently planted and then continued on. Garcia sighed, unable to make out anything further from that, and decided, if he was going to talk to Jaxa, he better do so now. He ran up the four flights of stairs, reached out to ring the door bell, and was surprised that the door opened as if expecting him. Wesley Crusher ran right into him as he made an untimely exit.

“Hey,” Garcia said.

“Sorry,” Wesley said, and pushed on, not really sorry.

Locarno was about to follow after Wesley but stopped to examine Garcia suspiciously.

“What do you want?” Locarno asked.

“Great welcome. You should really learn to say that in Klingon,” Garcia said.

“What do you want, Tam?” It was Jaxa, peering out at Garcia from behind Locarno.

“I wanted to speak with you,” Garcia said.

“Well, she doesn’t want to speak to you,” Locarno said.

“If you don’t mind, I would like to hear her say that, thank you,” Garcia said.

Locarno pushed Garcia. “Give me a reason. You know I want to.”

“That should be reason enough,” Garcia said. “Bring it.”

Garcia and Locarno proceeded to fight while Jean Hajar and Sito Jaxa tried to break it up. In the process of defending himself against Locarno without hitting Jaxa or Jean who were getting in the way, Garcia took a hit on the mouth.

“Both of you, stop it!” Hajar said, finally inserting herself between the two of them and pushing Locarno back by the shoulders. “As if there isn’t enough going on right now.”

“What do you want, Tam?” Jaxa said harshly, pulling Garcia’s arms to prevent him from re-engaging Locarno.

“I came to see you,” Garcia said, still a bit flustered. “Isn’t that enough?”

“I don’t have time, Tam. We have to go,” Jaxa said.

“We’ll finish this later,” Locarno said.

“Just cool it,” Hajar told Locarno.

“I’m cool,” Locarno said, pulling free of her, but challenging Garcia nonverbally.

“Cool?!” Hajar repeated.

“Cool!” Locarno echoed.

Hajar took Locarno’s arm and led him towards the stairs. Jaxa closed her door and followed right behind them. Garcia followed Jaxa out to the tram, trying to engage her in conversation. She really had nothing to say, other than good bye before boarding a tram. She didn’t even offer him a hook, like, “Maybe we’ll chat later.” Garcia took a tram in the opposite direction. Perhaps he might have gotten two words in with Jaxa had he not been distracted by the groundskeeper, he thought. No, he couldn’t blame it on Mr. Boothby. Boothby was right. He was procrastinating. He could have answered Boothby’s question with a yes and gone right up to Jaxa that moment, but instead, he choose the distraction. Was that a lesson?

His implant’s chronometer displayed the local time: 1530. Three thirty in the afternoon. He wasn’t hungry so he simply returned home. No one was home and the house was quiet. Garcia climbed into bed, practiced a neural feedback technique to

increase alpha waves, and before long he was napping comfortably. He fell to napping partly because he had nothing he wanted to do and partly because he was more comfortable in his own bed than he had been in detention. He roused only when Ambassador Clemmons jumped up on the bed and curled up beside him. The loud purring mixed with the afternoon sun spilling through the window made it that much harder to resist the nap. A stray thought floated by, "Am I getting old, or what?" Was that Boothby's message? I'm just standing here, getting old. Garcia held nonlucid dreams about cultivating plants. The flowers blooming were Star Fleet Officers.

It was evening when he woke and joined the others in the living room. They were watching a news release and eating Spinach Roti. The main viewer displayed a computer generated re-enactment of the flight maneuver known as the Kolvoord Starburst, while a narrator described what they were seeing. They showed it again, only this time it was done poorly and all the ships were destroyed. Trini was crying.

"Stupid fools," Kletsova said.

"What's going on?" Garcia asked.

"They killed Joshua," Kletsova said. "It wasn't an accident. They killed him."

"I don't understand why they aren't being put to death," Rivan said. "Do you not have any justice on this planet at all? Is Wesley immune to responsibility even on his home world?"

"There's been enough pain without having to inflict more pain, Rivan," Trini said. "In this particular instance, there is more justice letting the offenders live, taking with them for the rest of their lives the knowledge that they messed up. It also leaves the potential for them to repay society for that loss."

"Or repeat an offense," Rivan argued.

"They should do jail time, at least," Kletsova agreed with Rivan's sentiments.

"What is going to happen to them?" Garcia asked.

"Locarno was booted out. He may do some time," Trini said. "The other three will be allowed to stay in the Academy, but they have to start all over from scratch. They won't graduate this weekend."

Garcia nodded. There was nothing more to do. He turned to go back to bed.

"Good night," Garcia said.

"Are you alright?" Trini asked.

"Just really tired," Garcia said.

Garcia returned to bed. Clemmons was still there and demanded to be petted. After Clemmons returned to sleep, Rivan entered and made herself comfortable next to Garcia, squeezing out Clemmons in the process. He resettled at their feet.

"I really liked Joshua," Garcia said.

"I know," Rivan said. "If our child is a boy, would you mind if I named him Joshua?"

"That would be nice," Garcia said.

Rivan hugged Garcia closer and soon after they both slept.



The Graduation Ceremony was to begin soon and Lisa Kettler wanted one more conference with Garcia before it all began. Mostly she wanted reassurance from him that it would be all right. He made it sound as if a bad performance would be the end of the world. Her fellow choir members assured her that Garcia was just a perfectionist and was

trying to scare them. She walked back over to the dressing room that Garcia had confiscated only to find it was still blocked by two severe looking Vulcan's in traditional clothing that signified royal guards. They were so intimidating that she didn't even bother to advance to knock on the door. She returned to the girl's dressing room where the female choir members were waiting out the last moments before it all began.

"Lisa, you're making me nervous with you pacing and coming and going," Kelly said. "Would you please sit down?"

"Why do you suppose there are guards at Garcia's door?" Lisa asked.

"Should have guessed she wants to see Garcia," Monica said, checking a mirror to see if she had sufficient lipstick.

"What does that mean?" Lisa asked.

"Like you don't know," Jennifer said.

"I don't," Lisa said.

"You've been staying late after every choir practice for a private consult with Garcia," Monica said. "Everyone's gossiping about it."

"Well, stop gossiping and put people in their place for spreading rumors," Lisa said. "My talks with Garcia have been completely professional."

"You mean to tell me that you're not trying to position yourself for an opportunity to be with him now that Jaxa is on her way out?" Jennifer asked.

"You're all just vicious," Lisa said. "Jaxa isn't on her way out."

"Rumor has it she's pregnant with Garcia's child," Monica said.

"She's not pregnant," Allison said. "She got an abortion."

"She did not," Susan said. "She merely put it on ice so she could have it at a more convenient time in her life. I saw her leaving the frozen embryo bank."

"That doesn't mean it's what you think it is," Lisa said. "Maybe she was donating eggs, or putting some of her own into storage in case an accident makes her infertile. Besides, I think Garcia and Jaxa make a cute couple."

"Well, if Garcia is as career minded as he seems to be, he will disassociate himself from her," Monica said. "Child or no child, that girl is trouble."

"You think Jaxa should be thrown out of the Academy," Lisa said.

"Don't you?" Kelley asked. "She helped get Joshua killed. And then she lied about it. They should all be thrown out."

"I think they should be brought up for murder charges," Jennifer said.

"If you really want her to pay for a crime, then she's needs to pay society back for the rest of her life by working off her debt, and working for Star Fleet is one of the best ways to serve the Federation," Lisa said.

"You are so naïve," Kelley said. "You can't work with people if you can't trust them."

Lisa frowned and glanced out the door. The Vulcan guards were still at their post.

"Why does he need guards?" Lisa asked.

"Maybe because he's been in detention," Jennifer said.

"No. Garcia doesn't need guards," Monica said. "His fiancé does."

"Fiancé?" Lisa asked.

"Actually, I think it's his wife. You know Vulcans marry young and then only get together every seven years to procreate," Jennifer said. "Very ineffective, if you ask me. I'm surprised there are any little Vulcans."

“But I thought he was dating Jaxa?” Lisa said.

“He is,” Jennifer said. “He’s not completely Vulcan, so he needs it a little more frequently.”

“Needs what?” Lisa asked, and then blushed for having asked such a stupid question. Every one was amused by her question and her subsequent embarrassment.

“You better get your gown on,” Kelley said.

♪♪▶

“You can still refuse to perform the LoraEs telio LaShinta,” Simone said. “All of Vulcan will understand. In fact, they expect it. It is the only logical course.”

“They will perform it with or without me,” Garcia said. “And they can’t do it without me.”

“I have heard about the rehearsals,” Simone said. “It does not sound as if your presence will make any difference.”

“Did you come here to chastise me before the performance?” Garcia asked.

“Because I could be using this time to meditate.”

“I came because you have not come to see me,” Simone said.

“Well, I’ve been busy, and in jail, and...” Garcia began.

She stepped forward, touched his face. “I want to see you.”

“Before I am evicted from Vulcan society never to return again?” Garcia asked.

“If you fail, I will go with you into exile,” Simone said.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Garcia said. “You have social obligations beyond me. You have T’Pau’s shoes to fill.”

“T’Pau and I do not share the same shoe size,” Simone said.

“You misunderstand,” Garcia said.

Simone touched his face again. “No, you misunderstand. You and I are one. Our fates are intertwined.”

“So my failure not only brings disgrace upon me, but also upon you and T’Pau’s family,” Garcia said.

“Walk away from the performance,” Simone said. “Admiral Madison was warned of the consequences.”

“Avoiding the challenge brings disgrace upon me,” Garcia said. He took Simone’s hand into his own. “I will not back down.”

“I am not surprised,” Simone said. She kissed him lightly.

“What was that?” Garcia asked, surprised.

“A human expression of affection,” Simone said. “I must go to my seat. Four members of my staff, trained in the LoraEs telio LaShinta ritual dance, will perform on stage for you, if you so wish.”

“They would be welcomed,” Garcia said. “I will introduce them and explain their role.”

Simone backed away from Garcia. “Will you visit with me after the performance,” Simone asked.

“I’ll see you at the reception,” Garcia said. “Perhaps we’ll dance?”

Simone bowed.

Garcia nodded and watched her leave. Either she was getting use to the idea of them being one, or she was being adversely affected by their telepathic bond, he thought. He twirled his chair around to face the mirror and for a moment was transported back to

Iotia where he and Lenar were preparing for a television debut. Other than his memories, though, he was strangely alone. Perhaps because of the mental focus he was trying to attain. He closed his eyes to start his meditation when someone knocked on the door.

"Come," he said, rotating his chair back around.

"Do you have a moment?" Lisa asked.

"Shouldn't you be on stage? The ceremony will be starting soon," Garcia commented.

"I'm worried," Lisa said. "We didn't get one rehearsal to your satisfaction. And you had the last two nights off."

Garcia stood and walked over to her. He took her hands in both of his.

"Everything will be alright," he assured her, flooding her with assurance the same way Counselor Troi had assured him so many years ago. He smiled at Lisa and touched both of her shoulders. Then he put his hands on either side of her face. He felt her shiver but she didn't resist. She was actually hopeful and closed her eyes in anticipation. He kissed her lightly, touched his forehead to hers and then said, "You will not fail me in this. We are of one mind, one heart, and one soul."

Lisa embraced him in a hug and then departed for the stage. Garcia began to pace the room, having just committed himself to a particular course of action. He had initiated a light mind meld with Lisa, without her knowledge. To enhance his focus, he began performing a ritualistic meditation. He walked, aware of the proceedings outside, listening to the names of the graduates as they were called forth for duty, complemented and or praised for their contributions and personal distinctions, and when the orchestra played and the choir sung, he allowed the music to fill him and connect him to the musicians. He had felt a tug of Jaxa's awareness. She was sitting with the graduates, no doubt tears on her face. Her name would not be called. Graduates were around her, but she was sitting alone. She felt like she was sitting with strangers. He did not allow himself to follow that tangent or get lost in her worries. He even went as far as blocking her emotions, for he had no time for sympathy or empathy. The successful end to the ceremony required perfect focus. Further, he had a lot more minds to influence using his telepathy and the music was to be his vehicle. The heightened emotions surrounding this graduation class due to Joshua Alberts' death was giving it momentum.

Garcia raised his head and proceeded to the stage even as Admiral Chilton introduced him. He managed to meet Chilton with a smile and a hand shake. He used both hands to do this, in a very warm, welcoming manner, as if Chilton were a long lost friend. He approached a stage microphone and looked into the lights, hoping not to make out any faces in attendance. Rivan, Commander Riker, Counselor Deana Troi, Doctor Selar and Doctor Beverly Crusher were in the front row. Rivan smiled at him. Doctor Selar remained neutral. Garcia looked down into the orchestra pit and nodded. A drummer gave him a beat.

Garcia brought his hands together as if he were praying.

"What you are about to hear has never been performed by non Vulcans," Garcia said. It was a matter of fact, not an attempt by him to go on a fishing expedition for advance sympathy for an imperfect performance. "It has only been performed on Vulcan, by Vulcans. It has never been recorded by any technology, other than ink and paper, and that has been passed down with a reverence of an ancient, sacred script. I ask

if you have recording technology that you disable their recording and broadcast features at this time.”

Garcia looked specifically at Admiral Madison, not with a look of satisfaction, but with an awareness that he knew Madison had every intention of recording the performance anyway. Garcia didn't have to look at Simone to know that she came prepared with technology to make certain that there would not be any recordings, other than the brains of those in attendance. She activated it now. Garcia's microphone went dead so he raised his voice to accommodate the new situation.

“If you read tonight's itinerary, you've learned a little bit about what you are about to experience,” Garcia said. He signaled the drummer to increase the tempo. “You know that it is performed only once every sixty-three years. There is typically a ritualistic dance, which you will be experiencing tonight, complements of T’Pau.”

The dancers, two males and two females, came on stage from opposite sides. Their expressions were stark, and their clothing minimal and sharp, as if cut from metal. They took up positioned on the stage, in motion with the beat of the drum and then they began to define their space with hand and feet motions, very similar to an Indian dance. Garcia imagined them creating walls of light, as if they were painting with their aura's. The essence of that light hovered and slowly sunk to the floor, sparkling like fairy dust.

“This is the symbolic representation of the struggle between logic and emotion, between male and female,” Garcia went on, having given the dancers sufficient time to attain their positions and capture the audience with awe of their precise movements. “Breathe if you must, but do not stir, do not blink, and definitely, do not get up. I dare say that this will be a once in a life time experience that will go with you the rest of your life. And finally, I dedicate this performance to Joshua Alberts and his family.”

Garcia raised his hands suddenly and the orchestra flooded the Hall with what seemed liked chaos, accompanied by cannon fire. To the untrained ear it was chaos, but to Garcia it was this magnificent mathematical formula needing to be comprehended and solved. There was a tinkling of chimes amidst the chaos like the spilling of sand across a membrane. The chaos began to resolve itself into complex structures that were tolerable to the human ear. By the time Garcia was in place and motioning to the choir, there were several patterns evolving in the various type of instruments in the orchestra. Garcia brought in the choir, singing only vowel sounds, no consonants, or even any attempt at words. Lisa stepped forward and sang the first word. The male counterpart stepped forward next. The two seem to have a quarrel in the song and the choir as a whole answered it. There was obvious tension and resistance between both the two individuals and between the individuals and the group. Eventually the two soloists were reabsorbed back into the choir to become one voice, but many pitches. Then the choir demonstrated its own rifts, with soprano, alto, tenor and bass going off on their own tangents before finding harmony once again. The tempo slowed and accelerated, and sometimes Garcia looked like a mad man, furiously pumping his arms as if he might go into a rage and beat the performance out of the musicians. Occasionally, the two individual soloists were heard amongst the choir, their voices standing out pure and solid. As the song approached the end, members of the choir began to drop out, until only the two soloists were left. Then they, too, faded, leaving only the orchestra. Instruments intensities diminished and faded to silence, leaving a few key performers, bringing with it clarity and unity and peace. This, too, died, leaving a steady beat. A heart beat. A heart beat

fading. Gone. Total silence erupted almost as loud as the beginning chaos. The dancers had shrunk to the floor, folding over them selves as if praying, or dead, or both. The whole story mirrored the birth and death of the Universe. The birth and death of society. The life cycle of the Vulcan, with moments of pure logic and episodes of raw emotions.

Garcia slowly lowered his arms and turned to the audience. The Vulcan's in attendance were still seated. Doctor Selar actually had a tear in her eye. He had been successful. Garcia bowed. There was sudden pandemonium in the audience with standing ovation, clapping, whistles, verbal praises, and in some sections feet stomping. Garcia pointed to the orchestra and the choir. He then turned to walk nonchalantly off the stage. He didn't make it past the female dancer who was still in her prone position before collapsing. The moment he hit the floor, twelve choir members, seven orchestra members, and twenty two people in attendance also collapsed to the floor, passed out cold.



Doctor Beverly Crusher wasn't real enthused about attending the ceremony, but she was going to make the best of it, especially since Troi had four front row tickets, compliments of Garcia. Captain Picard sat with an Admiral friend in the balcony, directly across from Simone and her entourage. Wesley Crusher was in attendance, but only because his mother had insisted on him being there. Wes owed the graduating class that much and it was because she had put her foot down on that that she was not allowing herself to miss it. He sat with his graduating class and simply did not get up because his name was not called. Neither was Jaxa Sito. Neither was Jean Hajar. Nicholas Locarno didn't make an appearance.

"This should be quite exciting," Counselor Troi said, pure happiness on her face as she hugged Will's arm. "I haven't heard Garcia perform live since he was a kid. Will, did you ever hear him play at the museum?"

"I heard about his impromptu jazz sessions," Riker said. "But no."

"You should not let your expectations get the best of you," Doctor Selar said. "More than likely this will be a fiasco, the whole composition will fall apart, and all the Vulcans present, including myself, will be forced to walk out. The smartest thing Garcia could do at this point is walk away from the performance."

"You're joking, right?" Riker asked.

Selar dropped her head to one side. "I expect you know my response to that by now?"

"It's that serious?" Riker asked.

"Getting this wrong is political and social suicide for Garcia," Doctor Crusher said. "The Vulcan ear is very unforgiving."

"He knows the consequences for his actions," Selar said. "I would not feel sorry for him."

"I don't feel sorry for him," Crusher said. "I feel sorry for Vulcan for their loss if he fails. It hardly seems fitting that he should be considered exiled for the inability of the musicians to perform something that is technically out of their league."

"I think he will do just fine," Rivan said.

"Garcia always seems to manage," Troi agreed.

"If it is that serious, why would the Vulcans allow it to be performed?" Riker asked.

“I suspect there were protests made,” Doctor Selar said. “But humans are extremely stubborn. They do not always abide by logic.”

Nothing more was said on that subject, or any other, until the graduation ceremony began. They exchanged quiet comments about some of the graduating cadets as they were called forward, which were mostly complementary. Troi recognized the pain that Doctor Crusher felt when Wesley was passed over and she took her hand in a gesture of comfort. Doctor Crusher held her emotions in check, which were many and often conflicting. There was anger at Wes, disappointment, hurt, sorrow, and love. There was also empathy towards Joshua’s parents and sadness for the loss of life. A needless loss of life. When Garcia finally proceeded across the stage for the closing of the ceremony, Deanna commented on his appearance. She liked the outfit he was wearing, which was not the traditional conductor’s outfit. She thought the Indian shirt with the Mandarin collar and the Earth colors were really complimentary.

“He is very striking,” Crusher agreed. “Don’t you agree, Doctor?”

Doctor Selar kept her opinion to herself. She could almost sense an intense focus radiating outwards from Garcia. The performance came off flawless and not a Vulcan stirred through out. Even the humans, who were more likely than Vulcans to experience restlessness, a symptom she associated with a lack of discipline and was often accompanied by the shaking of a knee or a foot with nervous energy, were caught up in the music. They sat still, almost entranced, with a deeper observational mindset than normal. No doubt, Selar thought, it was the hypnotic way Garcia introduced the piece, starting with a drum beat and establishing an expectation. He had somehow managed to draw everyone into the music, using the music, his mannerism, and the dancers to gain the audience’s participation. Even Selar was so caught up in the presentation, the hypnotic tenor of Garcia’s voice, that the performance seemed over before it had even gotten started. The bedlam that ensued was not respectful, from Doctor Selar’s cultural perspective, but very human. She would have waited at least another five minutes to relish the echo of the music in her head, enjoying the silence that reigns after a good musical phrase. Clapping too soon was like washing chocolate off the tongue before it had even melted. Selar watched as Garcia bowed, ever gracious. He motioned to the performers who had really out done themselves, turned to walk away, and then collapsed. Selar must have seen it coming for she was on her feet and heading towards the stage before Garcia’s head hit the floor. Her hands touched the floor of the stage and she vaulted up and onto the stage floor. Doctor Crusher was at her side, but neither had a tricorder.

“Enterprise,” Crusher said, turning to the next person in her line of sight who needed assistance. “Lock onto Selar’s signal and beam her and Garcia directly to sickbay. Also, I need a med kit, now. Send Alyssa down. I want her help. Be prepared to receive more patients.”

♪♪▶

Garcia eyes fluttered and he awoke to find Doctor Crusher standing over him. He smiled, faintly. Other than feeling a little tired, he was fine. “I could get use to this,” Garcia said, referring to waking up with her watching over him.

Doctor Crusher was not amused. “Sit up,” she said.

Garcia complied, wincing. He reached for his forehead. “Ow. Alright, what happened?”

"You happened," Doctor Selar said.

"I don't understand," Garcia said.

"You understand quite perfectly," Captain Picard said.

"Own up, Tam," Counselor Troi said.

Garcia tried looking innocent, but they weren't buying it. "So, I captured the musicians in a light mind meld to influence their performance," Garcia said. "It's no difference than a hypnotist performing on stage."

"There's a hell of a big of difference and you know it," Troi said.

"It is unethical to use your telepathy to influence the actions, thoughts, and or behaviors of the uninitiated and those who are not expecting such a force on their minds," Doctor Selar.

"Oh, please," Garcia said. "I can count on my hands a number of times Spock used such forms of telepathy in an attempt to influence an opponent when the situation required."

"You're not Spock," Captain Picard said. "And these people are your colleagues not your opponents. You were not in a life or death situation which would require such drastic measures."

"You believe that because you don't fully appreciate the gravity of my situation," Garcia said.

"You made a lot of people sick," Doctor Crusher said. "You're lucky no one died. Including yourself. You're not trained for mass telepathic projection."

"You just don't get it. Being exiled from the Vulcan community is death," Garcia said. "And you can't understand it because you're not telepathic. It's not just a loss of verbal and physical contact, it's a loss of a mental/spiritual connection that can't be quantified from the human perspective. That connection is what makes a Vulcan a Vulcan, more than any other characteristic you can imagine. Yes, technically, and from a human perspective, you could say what I did was unethical, but not criminal. We all came together for one purpose, to celebrate and enjoy music. I simply facilitated the process by using my telepathy to enhance everyone's experience. Even without telepathic projecting, the performance of that song carries sufficient emotional and intellectual inertia that the audience was bound to be swept up in a transcendental experience. Hell, that's exactly what Admiral Madison was hoping for. He had the fortune to experience it once, became addicted to it, and has been trying to reproduce the natural high associated with that song ever since. Well, I gave it to him. I gave it to all of you. It's a gift."

"I would rather have you alive than have the emotional high of a song," Crusher said. "Can you understand that? For me, all the joy of the experience went out the window when you collapsed and I had to render medical attention to those affected by your stunt."

"You had this planned from the start," Troi said. "That's why you wanted me to invite Selar and Crusher to join me in the front row."

"I gave you the tickets before I decided on a course of action," Garcia said.

"I'm finding it more and more difficult to believe you," Troi said, unconsciously pinching her collar closed.

Captain Picard stepped forward. "The conclusion of this discussion is that you had other options. You could have walked away."

“No, I couldn’t walk away,” Garcia said. “Had anyone else conducted that song, Vulcan would have shut down its Earth embassy and withdrawn all its diplomats.”

“Perhaps,” Picard said. “And then Admiral Madison would have to make amends and answer for his behaviors, choices, and actions. Right now, we’re focused on you.”

“Is that why you brought me up here?” Garcia said. “Surely there was a closer medical facility than the Enterprise.”

“You’re my patient and this is my office,” Crusher said. “Anything else you want to know?”

“Am I in trouble with anyone but those present?” Garcia asked.

“No one is pressing charges, if that’s what you mean,” Picard said. “Apparently there are those who believe that the drastic measures you took were necessary. I don’t often reaffirm an offer of assistance to people who flagrantly violate social norms to achieve personal goals, but I am saying, right here and now, in front of these witnesses, that I am willing to help you succeed. You have friends here, Tammias. You don’t have to solve everything on your own. Had you come to me, I could have used my friends to influence Admiral Madison on your behalf. Maybe my friends and I could have come up with an alternative to the fiasco that happened.”

“Your offer doesn’t go unappreciated, Captain. I know I have friends here,” Garcia said. “But would you have gone for help if you were in my situation? Would you have turned down a personal challenge? I am just trying to get by the best I can.”

“I think you are capable of better,” Picard said.

“I know you are,” Counselor Troi said.

“You’re free to go,” Crusher said. “We’ll be in orbit a couple of more days if you need to call me. Especially if you experience any symptoms of vertigo or headaches. Afterwards, I’ll pass your patient information on to Doctor Lavrov at the Academy, unless you have a family Doctor you prefer.”

“Lavrov is fine,” Garcia said. “Thank you, Doctor.”

CHAPTER SIX

Garcia didn't go home. He went by Jaxa's place. She wasn't home. Funny how it works, he thought. Now that he wanted to see her, he was having trouble finding her. He wandered the campus, which was unusually quiet for this time of night, wondering where Jaxa was and what she might be doing. His email was full, both from strangers complementing the performance and people he knew. Even Lisa Kettler, his primary victim of his telepathic projections, wrote him a letter that was filled with praise and joy of the experience. She wanted to see him again and, judging by the letter, was available even as he walked. He imagined one of the lights in the dormitory building was hers and he wondered if she was out on her balcony, alone, thinking of him, or had she already given up on a response and joined other friends. Her sudden interest in him was not unexpected. Influencing a person's mind, the way he had done hers, often had that sort of affect. That and the fact that he initiated the mind meld with her by means of a kiss might also have played a part in increasing her attraction to him. It was one of the reasons that Vulcan's had so many rules and disciplines for telepathy.

From the human perspective, using telepathy to influence a nontelepath was the equivalent of taking someone's arm and twisting it up behind their back, forcing them to do your bidding. The Vulcan's didn't see it this way because as telepaths they can use techniques to block, recruit assistance from other telepaths, and or assimilate the telepathic energy. The Betazoid's would have either agreed to allow his influence or denied him, with denying him canceling out any of the influence he might have had on the music. That, and what one telepath knows, all the telepaths know, meaning Betazoids are less likely to be manipulated into doing something they don't want. How he felt about his actions depended on which point of view he chose to adopt. Unfortunately, the point of view that was stuck in his head was pretty much summed up by Captain Picard: "You are capable of better."

A man in his thirties approached Garcia. "Excuse me," the man said. "You are Garcia the Great, aren't you?"

"Sometimes," Garcia said. He didn't want to argue the great or deny his identity, but a stray thought occurred to him: if he ever caught up with the person who started "the great" nonsense, he was likely to cause that person some bodily harm. "How can I help you?"

"Admiral Pressman was hoping to have a moment of your time," the man said. "If you'll follow me, I'll take you right to him."

"And this would be concerning?" Garcia asked.

"I'm not privy to that information. I was just asked to find you," the man said.

"And your name is?" Garcia asked.

The man smiled. "If you'll come with me?"

Cloak and dagger, Garcia thought. It would at least take his mind off things. He followed the man to one of the towers, up several flights of stairs, and down a corridor. It was not lost on Garcia why the man chose the stairwell. Lifts tended to register the occupants by means of their communicator badges, leaving a computer trace of their presence. Not that the stairwells couldn't be monitored, too, but the lifts took passenger names in case of an accident, so if someone needed to identify the remains it could be done. Then again, Garcia could have just been experiencing normal levels of paranoia. Perhaps the no-named man liked climbing stairs for exercise. At any rate, the building

was empty due to the late hours and the fact it was graduation night. The man opened the door for Garcia, motioned him through, and then shut the door behind Garcia. Garcia was now in the reception area of an office, alone. The secretary's desk was cleaned of clutter and illuminated with a soft blue light. The office door to the right was slightly ajar, allowing light from the lit room beyond to flow through, creating a yellow rectangle of light that intersected with a stone on the floor that split the light into primary colors.

Garcia pushed forward and eased the door open.

"Oh, come in," Admiral Pressman said, standing. "I was wondering if I might see you tonight. The timing couldn't have been better. So many things in play. You really don't know just how well timed all of this is. What's the word? Ah, yes, synchronicity."

Admiral Eric Pressman shook Garcia's hand with enthusiasm. "That was some performance earlier, let me tell you. It got me to thinking and I started reviewing your files and I came to the conclusion that you're just the man I need for a special project. I know you've been through quite a bit, lately, but you've come through it so well that I've moved you to the top of my list. Are you interested?"

"So far I've not heard anything to express interest in," Garcia said. "Except what appears to be the ramblings of a madman."

Pressman chuckled. "You're quick. Another quality I like about you, but I don't have time to explain it to you. Let me cut to the chase. How would you like your own command?"

"You mean, you'll give me a ship when I graduate?" Garcia asked.

"No, I mean, right now," Pressman said, returning to his chair. "All you have to do is pass an interview. It may be the toughest interview of your life and passing only means you will face an even tougher challenge. Lives are at stake, perhaps even the Federation itself. No one else I have called in has managed to pass, but I believe you have what it takes. Further, I am certain you and I can work really well together. I like some of your special abilities, like your implant, telepathy and limited psionics, your ability to use Kelvan technology, and what I like most is your ability to stand up for yourself in court. In addition to getting your own ship, I'll make sure all your legal troubles go away."

Garcia blinked, his awareness going up a notch at the mention of Kelvan technology. The offer to make the court martial go away was extra, especially if he could make it go away by performing some extraordinary service at some considerable risk to himself. It seemed a reasonable trade off considering the number of lives he had affected by his recent decisions.

"What sort of interview must I pass?" Garcia asked.

"A serious interview," Pressman said, leaning into his desk. "All I need is a yes or no. This is not a trivial thing I ask of you. The weight of the Universe as we know it is on the line. I can tell you more if you pass the interview. Are you interested?"

Garcia nodded, thinking no more court martial to deal with and his own command to boot! The weight of the Universe "as we know it" had an influence on him as well. That was why he was here, to command a starship and make a difference.

"Yes," Garcia said.

Admiral Eric Pressman tossed Garcia a communicator badge, preprogrammed for the appropriate channel. Garcia caught it and the pressure of the catch activated the badge. He felt the tell tale signs of a transporter beam catch hold of him, which kicked

his level of alertness up another notch. He was certain Pressman noticed the unpleasant look on his face, which was part hatred for the transporter and part anger at not being forewarned. He blinked and Pressman was gone.

The up end on that blink revealed Garcia to be on a transporter pad, in a dimly lit room. A room dimly lit due to indirect lighting, a soft red glow that bled through like spilt wine making the walls darker than they might have been otherwise. The smell of Klingons filled his nostrils and the sight of them standing before him brought his senses to a whole new level of awareness. There was the transporter operator directly in front of him. There was a Klingon Captain and four Klingon Honor Guards, the elite of the elite. The four Honor Guard snapped to attention. The Klingon Captain scowled and stepped forward, pointing.

“You?!” The Captain said, not hiding the surprise and contempt in his voice. “The Great Tammis Garcia?!”

“Red alert, shields up,” Garcia thought to himself. He flashed a smile of affirmation to the Captain. “Is this going to be a fair fight?” Garcia asked.

The Captain gritted his teeth. “Follow me,” he said, grunted a command, pivoted on his feet and exited the transporter room.

Garcia followed and the four Honor Guard trailed behind him in formation of two by two. As he was led down the corridor, he counted bulkheads in case he needed to find his way back in the dark or blinded, but mostly he was thinking that these bulkheads were the last things he would see before he died. No one impeded their progress. In fact, the only person who might have crossed their path quickly turned and went the other way. Apparently not everyone was interested in seeing a train wreck, Garcia thought. A door opened and they stepped into a training room. He noticed a fifth and sixth guard in the corner as he moved in towards the center of the room, but he didn’t make eye contact with them, or even reveal that he was aware of their presence. His focus was on a chair at the far end of the room. In the chair sat a fat Klingon. A fat Klingon Admiral.

“Admiral Sheaar!” Garcia said, breathlessly, and quickly bowed. This Klingon had a reputation, and besides, when in Rome... Especially when the Romans can kick your ass!

The Captain and the four honor guard also bowed.

“Captain MaHt,” Sheaar said. “I thought we had exhausted our candidate list.”

“I did, too, Admiral Sheaar,” Maht said. “But they have finally scratched the bottom of a rotten barrel to have found this one. Must we continue with this farce?”

Admiral Sheaar ignored the question and examined the victim. “Tammis Parkin Arblaster Garcia, if I’m not mistaken,” Admiral Sheaar said. “Author of the Other Klingon. Fellow Champion of a recent battle. Friend of Captain Glor and an honorary member of the Pa Nun’s crew. Come forward.”

Garcia took six steps forward. He heard the honor guard spreading out behind him. On the walls around him were assorted weapons, but he tried not to be obvious in his inspection. The closest weapon, or more specifically, the one he recognized and could readily use in self defense, was at least ten steps away. The Admiral smiled, recognizing Garcia’s survey of the room and its content.

“You think you understand honor, do you?” Admiral Sheaar asked.

“I think so,” Garcia said.

Admiral Sheaar threw a metal ball to Garcia. It was almost the perfect size ball for Garcia's hand, his fingers nearly closing over it. It felt solid, like a dom-jot ball. Sheaar spoke a word and the ball began to grow uncomfortably warm, taking on a reddish tint.

"You can follow orders?" Sheaar said.

"Sometimes," Garcia said.

"No matter what else happens, don't drop that ball," Admiral Sheaar instructed.

"And your second order?" Garcia asked, not distracted by the sounds of the honor guard drawing their ceremonial swords from their sheaths.

"What makes you think there is a second order?" Sheaar asked.

"Because you said orders, plural," Garcia said.

"English is very precise," Sheaar said, nodding appreciatively. "I like that about your language. Your second order: defend yourself."

Garcia's awareness switched into overdrive and the world became intimate and slow. There was no way for him to reach even the closest weapon on the nearest wall before one of the four Honor Guards had sliced him. The closest enemy to him was the Admiral himself. Garcia paused only long enough to assess the situation and choose a strategy.

From the Klingon's perspective, Garcia didn't even hesitate. He simply acted. The first thing he did was advance on the Admiral, throwing the ball he held. The ball hit Sheaar right dead center of his forehead with an audible smack. It bounced off the forehead and Garcia caught the ball with the same hand he had been holding it. Admiral Sheaar went down like a sack of potatoes, sliding out of his chair. Garcia continued forward, grabbing the hilt of the of the Admiral's family sword. Without stopping, walking right up the Admiral, he placed one foot into the chair and then dove over the back of the chair. Garcia rolled out of the dive, coming up bearing the Admiral's family sword, backwards. The rise of the sword was just in time to ward off the blow of the first attacker. He ducked allowing the first attacker to go by, hitting him in the side of the head with the hilt of the sword, flipped the sword over, blocked the swing of the second attacker and stepped in and punched the Klingon in the face with the ball. The ball carried some weight which temporarily dazed the Guard, allowing Garcia time to focus on the third attacker. He disarmed the third and sent that Klingon falling backwards with a kick. He turned and blocked the next attack from the second guard. All of this action took place in a constant blur of motion, a perfect flow that might have made the whole affair seem choreographed by someone looking in. The First guard hit Garcia with a fist, but moving in allowed Garcia to hit him again as well. Using a telekinetic burst of energy, Garcia dislodged an ornate shield from the display and it fell on the first Guard's head. It didn't knock him out, but the Klingon turned to assess the situation believing he was being attacked from behind. Garcia shoved him further away with a boot to the Klingon's backside.

Garcia unarmed the second Guard and managed to skewer him, pushing his sword through the right shoulder. The second attacker reached for the hilt of Garcia's sword with both hands, enclosing them around Garcia's hand and the hilt. The guard struggled to pull the sword free, while at the same time trying to prevent Garcia from escaping his clutches. The first guard returned only to get a boot in his chest, winding him. Twisting under, around and back in relationship to the impelled sword, Garcia was able to engage

the other opponents, but since he was unable to disengage from the second guard, his options were limited.

Garcia tried to push the sword further in, causing his victim to cry out in pain. Shoving and hanging on the sword caused the guard to move, and so Garcia proceeded to usher the second Guard backwards around the chair. The guard had no choice but to comply from sheer pain caused by Garcia flexing the sword. All it took was a little twisting motion and the attacker moved where Garcia wanted him to move and not without grunts of discomfort. In this manner, Garcia was able to temporarily block the attacks of guards three and four, but left himself vulnerable to attacks from the first Guard. Garcia manipulated his victim back and forth to avoid the lunges of the first Guard. Even with one of Garcia's hands out of play due to the ball, and his other still enclosed in the grip of his captive Klingon, he easily kept the others at bay, as if he were playing with them.

The fifth guard to come in swung his sword. Garcia pulled the Klingon holding him so that his arm was cut. It would have been cut clean through and severed, except for the armour. The Klingon let go and Garcia ducked a second swing and the sword clanged against the wall. Garcia kicked the fifth guard's hand, causing him to drop the sword. Had the Klingon bent down to retrieve the sword, Garcia would have kicked him in the head. Instead, the fifth guard grabbed up a whip from the weapon display, popped it once to warm up, and then used it against Garcia. Garcia blocked with the hand holding the ball, allowing the whip to wind around his arm. He ignored the pain and the blood, jerked the whip from the guards hand. The hard end of the whip, the handle, flew and hit the first guard dead center of the forehead, stunning him, and when Garcia whipped it back to hit the fifth guard, it knocked him completely out.

The guard that Garcia had skewered had just about worked the sword free. Garcia moved in and shoved the sword back in. Grasping the sword by the hilt, he maneuvered his trapped guard around to block another onslaught, but he knew that this impasse wouldn't last forever. At the least, this guard would soon collapse due to a loss of blood.

Garcia's prediction came true sooner than he wanted, but not in the way he had imagined. The Klingon Captain had tired of the impasse, and so he pulled his disruptor from his belt and shot the second Honor Guard. The four remaining Guards turned to their Captain, surprised by the odd resolution to the problem. This gave Garcia time to react. As the Klingon guard started to fall, dead or stunned, it was hard to tell, Garcia rushed the Captain, taking the dead weight of the Klingon with him, thereby blocking any more blasts from the energy weapon. The four Guards turned back to Garcia, expecting him to drop the useless body, but Garcia had only pushed in tighter to the body not allowing it to fall. He drove the limp body into the Captain, compelling him to block or catch the body.

The Captain's firing was effectively blocked until Garcia was inside his firing range. He let go of the Guard he was pushing, grabbed at the disruptor and pulled the Captain towards him, literally dragging the Captain over his fallen Guard, bringing him off balance. Garcia forced the Captain to fire the weapon, taking out one more of the honor guards. The remaining Guards hesitated, due to situational awareness. The Captain was engaged with the victim, and since it could be considered bad form to engage a hostile that is already engaged by another Klingon, especially a superior, they waited.

“MRocK!” the Captain said, trying to push Garcia away.

At the word, another feature of the ball manifested. It instantly grew spikes. The spikes penetrated Garcia’s hand and fingers making it impossible to drop the ball, though that was exactly what he wanted to do. Apparently the Captain had thought Garcia would withdraw from the pain, but Garcia knew that would have been a death sentence. Instead, he increased the intensity of his struggle. Garcia came up under the Captain’s firing arm, twisting the hand into his back. The Captain finally dropped the weapon, but only after Garcia broke the Captain’s arm. He pushed the Captain into Guard number four and ran towards the wall hoping to grab another sword. The spikes withdrew, hurting almost twice as much as when they had first deployed. It took conscious effort not to drop the ball.

He heard and knew that Guard one was right behind him, so he had no time to stop to choose a weapon. Garcia literally ran up the side of the wall, hit the ceiling and came down behind the first Guard and pounded him on the back of the neck with the ball. The guard went down and Garcia collected a sword from the wall. The remaining Guard had dropped their ceremonial swords in favor of the battleH. He blocked one battleH and threw the ball at the other attacker. Right before it hit, he yelled, “MRocK!” The fourth guard dropped his battleH to pull the MrocK ball from his neck. “MRocK” the guard croaked, turning the spikes off. He tossed the MrocK ball back towards Garcia and was forced to put pressure to his neck to keep from bleeding to death. Instead of catching the ball with his hands, Garcia caught it with his foot and tossed it straight up.

Using both hands on his acquired sword, Garcia quickly disabled the last guard, catching and tossing the ball back in the air with his foot twice as if it were a hackey sack game. Once the guard was disarmed, Garcia kicked the ball right into the man’s head. The Klingon stumbled back as Garcia caught the ball in his good hand and hit the Guard again in the head. The guard staggered back, but didn’t fall. Garcia buried his sword in the Klingon’s thigh and moved just in time to ward off the blow of the Captain’s dagger. Garcia held his sympathy for the Captain in check. One of the Captain’s hands was hanging limp and useless due to the compound fracture, but he would still kill Garcia if given the chance. As Garcia moved out of the way, he hit the Captain on his damaged arm.

In avoiding another thrust from the Captain’s dagger, Garcia had unintentionally put his back to the Guard with the wounded neck. This Guard, enraged that he was about to die and had not even yet touched his enemy, let go of his neck and rushed Garcia, gripping him in a bear hug. The Captain rushed in, thinking he would take advantage of Garcia being immobilized. Garcia used the hold he was in to bring both of his feet to bear. He kicked the Captain and sent him staggering backwards. As soon as Garcia’s feet hit the floor again, he slipped out of the bear hug and tossed the Klingon to the floor as easily as shrugging off a kid in play. The Klingon hit the floor hard, practically already unconscious due to the loss of blood. This body of the last Klingon made it difficult for the Captain to step in for a good killing blow, but he scored a hit. Thrusting the knife for a gut wound, he drew blood as Garcia maneuvered out of the way. His shirt was literally shredded and soaked with his own blood from maybe a half a dozen strikes.

The Captain laughed. “MRocK!” he said.

Garcia good hand was torn by the emerging spikes, but he was able to dodge the dagger again. Garcia cupped his hands together, allowing the blood from both hands to

pool as the Captain maneuvered in for the final kill. There was no doubt in Garcia's mind that the Captain had every intentions of killing him, but he didn't retreat.

"Good! Die like a Klingon," the Captain said. "And I will see to it that you are ushered into Sto-vo-Kor with honors."

Garcia spied a batleH on the floor, but it would be difficult to wield in the best of circumstances, but with one hand holding a ball, and both hands now damaged due to the spike penetration, it would be impossible for him to properly grip and wield.

"Captain to First Officer Crael," the Klingon said. "Report to the training room. Now! You see, Garcia, there is no escape. Die nobly, like a Klingon."

Garcia nodded, as if he were compliant. When the Captain stepped in for the killing blow, Garcia tossed the blood that had pooled in his hands into the Captain's face, scoring a direct hit to his eyes. Consequently, the Captain's strike was off and Garcia managed to maneuver around the dagger, with only a minor wound. He punched the Captain in the side of the head, using the hand with the ball in it. The captain staggered, dropping his dagger, still blinded with blood. Garcia hit the Captain again and again. When the Captain knew he was losing, he let out a final berserk scream and grappled blindly at Garcia. The Captain used Garcia as a battering ram and ran him up against the wall.

"MRockK!" Garcia yelled, and as the spikes launched out, Garcia hit the Captain with the spikes on the back shoulder.

The Captain staggered back, screaming.

"MRockK!" Garcia yelled again, and punched the Captain in the Chest with the spikes.

The Captain fell back, coughing up blood. Garcia hit the man in the face again, but the Spikes had retracted so it wasn't a killing blow. The Captain went down, none the less. The door to the training room opened and the first officer came to an uneasy halt, sliding on blood. Garcia dove for the Captain's disruptor and retrieved it just in time to fire at the first officer as the first officer fired at him. The first officer went down. Garcia staggered to both knees, activating his personal communication's badge.

"Medical Emergency. Ten to beam to the nearest medical facilities. Security requested. Stat!" Garcia said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The closest Star Fleet approved medical facilities, relative to the training room onboard the cloaked Klingon vessel just happened to be the Enterprise. No sooner than the transporter coordinates were registered, a whole slew of alarms went off. First and foremost, an alert went out that there was a cloaked ship in Earth's orbit. The transporter chief on duty that had accepted the emergency call, engaged the transporter locks, but then smartly delayed the re-materialization process, allowing security to be present when the nine Klingons and the one human ended up in Sickbay. Worf and a security detail came running. The highest levels of security protocols on Enterprise, on two other Star Fleet vessels in orbit, and on Earth started to be implemented. All of which meant more attention was being drawn to the situation than Admiral Eric Pressman had anticipated or even wanted. He quickly went about covering his tracks and directed an Admiral Singer to transport immediately up to the Enterprise to take care of business.

Captain Picard arrived at sickbay simultaneously with Worf and the security detail. The transport completed, leaving nine scattered Klingons bodies, dead or unconscious, and in their midst was Garcia, on his knees, about ready to collapse from exhaustion and from his wounds. Doctor Crusher moved towards him almost instinctively.

"Wait," Garcia said. "Don't touch me. Wake Admiral Sheaar. That one."

Doctor Selar immediately began treatment on the Klingon Garcia had indicated.

"Captain, I recommend we do as he says," Worf said. "He is holding a MRock."

Garcia cursed as the spikes erupted once more. "Bloody hell, Worf! Did you have to say that?!"

"What is it?" Picard asked.

"Depending on the rule structure implemented for its use, it could be just a weapon, or it could be a bomb," Worf said. "Under no circumstances should the ball touch the floor decking. Further, the fewer people who touch it, the better."

"Garcia? What is going on here?" Picard said.

Admiral Sheaar woke up. "Where am I?!"

"You're on board the Enterprise," Doctor Selar said.

Sheaar roared and pulled away from the Doctor's care. Several weapons, including Worf's, were instantly trained on him.

"You will cease the hostilities," Worf said.

"Excuse me," Garcia said. "I passed. Now disable this."

Sheaar orientated himself, slowly began to chuckle, and then roared with laughter. "You didn't drop it."

"He cheated!" Captain Maht said, breathing better now. "He did drop the ball."

"No, he threw the ball," Sheaar said. "English is very precise."

"My first officer is dead," Maht complained.

"And what was your first officer doing in the training room?" Sheaar demanded.

"I called him to be a witness," Maht said. "I also lost three honor guards. And he attacked you!"

Sheaar laughed. "Indeed," he said, crossing closer to Garcia. "Tell me, Garcia the Great. Why did you attack me first? Why did you attack me at all?"

“You told me to defend myself. Naturally, if presented the opportunity, one should always eliminate the biggest threat first,” Garcia said. “I figured I could handle the Captain and his men.”

“I’ll kill you,” MaHt challenged, shrugging off the medical aid’s attention.

“You should be nicer to me, especially since, by Klingon law, I am now legally entitled to your warship,” Garcia said. “And having spared your life, you’re now my first officer.”

Admiral Sheear almost died with laughter as Captain MaHt screamed with rage. Captain MaHt jumped up off the bed to attack Garcia, but Worf interceded, putting his elbow into the Captain’s neck, dropping him back to the bed. He went silent, choking.

“Worf! I just healed the man,” Crusher snapped.

“Heal him again,” Worf said. “So I can knock him down again.”

“You can even ‘talk smack,’ like a Klingon,” Sheear praised Garcia.

“Admiral Sheear, I would like to know the meaning of this,” Picard demanded.

“I will tell you everything you need to know, Captain Picard,” Admiral Singer said, stepping through the armed security force. “Admiral Sheear, may I escort you back to your ship?”

“You may. Have my men beamed back as well,” Admiral Sheear said. He walked over to Garcia. “Hand me my toy.”

Garcia surrendered the MROCK ball back to its rightful owner. Sheear shut it off with a single command. Garcia memorized the word just in case he ever came upon another MROCK ball in the future, even though he knew that each ball was probably programmed with its own set of words.

“Well?” Singer asked Sheear.

“He’ll do,” Sheear agreed. “Patch him up and send him back to me.”

“Captain Picard,” Admiral Singer said. “Fix Garcia up and transport him back to the Klingon ship. And no questions, Picard.”

Admiral Singer departed with Admiral Sheear. Captain Picard looked to Garcia for an answer but Garcia, now free of his obligations, gave into his desire to pass out. He went down face first into the floor.

“Put him in bed seven,” Crusher said.

Worf and Picard moved Garcia to a bed, while Crusher moved to another Klingon. “Selar, we can still save this one. We need to get the blood out of his lungs and patch the neck wounds. Allyssa, cut Garcia’s shirt off and start work on the chest wounds. I’ll be with you shortly. Security, get these other Klingons to beds and then make some room for us to work.”

An hour after the chaos dissolved, Sickbay was empty, except for Garcia, still sleeping, Doctor Crusher, Lt. Worf, and Captain Picard. The latter three were engaged in a discussion about the event. Subdued lighting made many of the bed diagnostics seem brighter than usual with Garcia’s bed the only active display. The surviving Klingons and the dead had been transported back to their ship. As Garcia began to come around, he heard a bit of their talking, which ceased the moment Crusher became aware of his stirring. She went to him and proceeded to scrutinize him. He smiled faintly up at her.

“You still have some minor bruising to heal,” Crusher said. “But I wanted to wait until you were conscious. Can you sit up?”

"Yes," he said, but he accepted her help none the less. He looked at Picard and Worf. He wondered if they noticed his shoulders slumping or heard his sigh.

"I know your records say that you are trained in the Combat Ki form of martial arts, which makes you resistant to injuries, but you're not immortal," Crusher said.

"Klingons are effectively twice as strong, on average, than a human being, especially if they were born and raised on Kronos, where the gravity is slightly higher than Earth's. You can be hurt, maybe not by your average human, but you can be hurt."

"I know," Garcia said, and winced suddenly. "Ow. That's not supposed to hurt."

"Be still," Crusher said.

"Garcia, how is it that if there is any intrigue to be had, you seem to be at the center of it?" Picard asked.

"Just lucky, I suppose," Garcia said.

"What were they interviewing you for?" Worf asked.

"I don't know," Garcia said.

"You don't know, or you're not saying?" Picard asked.

"I actually don't know," Garcia said.

"Who set this up? Admiral Singer?" Picard asked.

"I don't know," Garcia said. No need to drag Pressman into this, Garcia thought. Had Pressman wanted a piece of this, he wouldn't have sent Singer up to clean up the mess Garcia had made.

"I don't know," Picard echoed, not hiding his sarcasm. "That just doesn't cut it, Ensign. I had four dead and five incapacitated Klingons in my sickbay, and you were literally cut to threads. There's a cloaked Klingon war ship in orbit around Earth, which is also highly unusual, and I want to know why I shouldn't put you under arrest right now."

"Captain, have you ever been asked to keep a secret?" Garcia asked.

Captain Picard's eyes blazed with fury and his jaw muscles clenched, but he reigned it in. Crusher could tell Picard was holding back. She finished her job and put the tools of her trade away. She took a step back, arms crossed in front of her chest.

"My patience with you has worn a bit thin, young man," Picard said, when he gained enough composure to speak. Picard wondered why he allowed Garcia, more than anyone, to work him up so badly. Was it the fact that Garcia reminded him of himself when he was younger? Reckless, arrogant, and stubborn. Picard had to ignore his phantom heart pains. "Have you been given orders that require secrecy?"

"Have you been ordered not to ask questions?" Garcia asked.

Worf nearly hit Garcia but Captain Picard stayed his hands. "Get him off my ship," Picard said.

"With pleasure, Captain," Worf said.

Garcia was yanked up and out of sickbay so fast he didn't have time to thank the Doctor for healing him, once again. Not that she was probably receptive to his thanks considering the trouble he had been to her. The walk to the transporter was brief, with Worf practically shoving him all the way there. Garcia pulled free to climb into the transporter alcove on his own power.

"Beam him back to where you found him," Worf instructed Robinson.

Robinson was very serious about her job, except when Worf wasn't looking directly at her. She passed Garcia a quick smile. Garcia smiled back. She transitioned

right back into her stern look, as if she were appropriately angry with him, just as Worf glanced back to her.

“You better hope we don’t meet again,” Worf told Garcia.

“Or...” Garcia said on the Enterprise. “What?” he finished on the Klingon transporter pad.

Captain MaHt glared at Garcia. “nuqneH” Klingon for Hello which translates into “What do you want?” was the appropriate Klingon greeting for Garcia to give, but “what” sufficed. MaHt nodded. “Follow me,” MaHt said.



Captain MaHt brought Garcia back to the training room and at Admiral Sheaar’s word, departed, leaving the Admiral and Garcia alone together. MaHt did not leave without engaging Garcia in eye contact and posturing. Garcia ignored the challenge which angered MaHt to no end. The door shut and Admiral Sheaar approached, shrugging off his cloak.

“Do you know what you’ve been recruited for?” Admiral Sheaar asked.

“No,” Garcia said.

“Are you in?” Admiral Sheaar asked.

“I go through all that trouble to pass a test and you wonder if I am in?” Garcia asked. “Yes, I am in. What is all of this about?”

“The primary reason Admiral Pressman and I got together was to devise a defense against the greatest potential threat our nations have ever faced, the Borg,” Admiral Sheaar said. “To that end, we developed a weapon that could annihilate them and the platform necessary for the delivery of that weapon. The platform is the first starship to be built on a joint Federation Klingon commission.”

“A new weapon system?” Garcia asked.

“Do you know how many Federation ships were lost defeating that one Borg ship?” Admiral Sheaar asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said. That one Borg ship nearly decimated the entire fleet. A total of 40 ships were destroyed at Wolf 359; the Buran, the Ahwanee, the Liberator, the Rosevelt, the Melbourne, the Firebrand, the Saratoga, the Bellerophon, the Kyushu, the Princeton, the Bonestell, the Tolstoy, the Chekov, the Gage, the Yamaguchi... He had to force himself to stop the count, because with each ship named a tree branched off in his mind delineating the names of the dead. It could be overwhelming if he allowed it.

“If the Federation falls at this time, so the does the Klingon Empire. As much as I hate it, we need each other,” Admiral Sheaar said. “There is an immediate Borg threat that needs to be eliminated. We dispatched a Starship, but something went wrong. Pressman believes there was a mutiny and the crew was killed. The ship’s advanced security system was engaged, it eliminated the threat, and returned the ship to its base, as it was programmed to do. Unfortunately, only Pressman knows how to disengage the security system and he refuses to budge on that unless we have a Federation representative as Captain of this joint venture. You have passed the interview and will be made Captain of the Federation Klingon vessel, the Path Finder. Your crew will consist of seventy five Klingons and twenty five Star Fleet Officers.”

Garcia didn’t know what to ask next. “What sort of ship?”

“The Path Finder is a prototype, Starburst class,” Admiral Sheaar said. “It’s small, fast, and its primary function is for surveillance and intelligence gathering. When

not actively engaged to an assignment, you are to be silent running, looking for mutual threats to the Federation and Klingon Empire.”

“How fast?” Garcia asked, knowing full well that mission objective of “looking for threats” could make a person paranoid.

“Trans-warp capable,” Admiral Sheaar said.

“I know the Federation has dabbled in trans-warp, but I’ve not heard of any stories of sustained success,” Garcia said. “How have you managed to work out the quirks?”

“We have shortened the transwarp cycle to the minimum burst of warp necessary to relocate the ship,” Admiral Sheaar said. “It takes tremendous amounts of computer processing power to make it happen, but the end result is that your ship can jump almost instantaneously from one point to another. In theory, the distance is unlimited, but we have yet to have an effective demonstration of that theory.”

“So it does still have quirks,” Garcia said.

“All warp endeavors have risk associated with them,” Sheaar said.

“You’re avoiding my question,” Garcia pointed out.

“I didn’t hear a question, but it should function without quirks,” Sheaar said. “No guarantees. Your Klingon crew will be hesitant to use the transwarp technology, for two reasons. One, they will not trust the computer control necessary to make the jump. Klingons, as a society, have never liked relying on computers as much as you humans have. The second reason they will hesitate is that they have heard rumors of specific types of quirks where the ship jumps and people are left behind, or they arrive at their destination to find themselves melded into the machinery.”

“What about the destructive capabilities of this new weapon?” Garcia asked, he could hardly blame the Klingons for their concerns. He shared them.

“Just one of these bombs could destroy an entire solar system,” Sheaar said.

Garcia was speechless. What did they create? And how did they manage to lose control over something so powerful?

“I have not met many humans that I like,” Admiral Sheaar confessed, admiring Garcia’s silent contemplation of what he had just revealed. “Some of the old war still runs through my blood. I am prejudiced against humans, but I am not so biased that I will overlook an ally when I see one. In the spirit of cooperation, Admiral Pressman and I decided to join forces against the enemies that would see us destroyed. Together we commissioned this new class of starship, the first Klingon Federation starship. Think of it. Klingons and Humans working side by side. And you, their Captain. The Klingon’s warrior spirit and the Human’s ability to adapt readily to new situations could make us great together. You have the chance to make history!”

“You built a new ship and a new weapon system and lost control over it?” Garcia asked, not buying the conversation shift.

“The efficacy of this program requires total secrecy,” Admiral Sheaar said, ignoring his concerns. “It would do us no good if the Borg learned about this ship and were able to come up with a defense. Your job won’t be easy. Gaining the respect of your Klingon crew and holding their loyalty will take great strength on your part. But I think, if there is a human who can do it, who understands the way of the warrior, it will be you. None of the other candidates came close. We need you. It’s like this, Garcia. In addition to the Borg, the Klingon Empire has become vulnerable to the kind of enemy

that lurks in the shadows. It is no secret that the Romulans have infiltrated our people and turned us against ourselves. If we don't destroy ourselves, the Romulans or the Cardassians will. We have watched Cardassian troop movements and I am certain war is coming, but society is blind to the threat. They don't listen to reason. The youth would rather make believe on a holosuite than face a real adversary. The leaders are too much involved in their own political gain to rally support for a god cause. They have forgotten the way of the warrior and have become politicians."

"Politicians with teeth," Garcia mumbled.

"Umph," Sheaar said. "Which they use to bite their own tails. That is one of the reason I need you. As a non Klingon, you will be impartial to the political chaos ensuing and can act according to the greater good. I suspect that there are other enemies that I have yet to see, like the parasite creature that nearly toppled the Federation a few years back. Your job will be to help safeguard against these enemies, to seek them out and bring them into the open, so that we can fight them with honor in the light of day. Admiral Pressman and I agree on this particular issue. If either of our nations falls, the other is soon to topple with it, and so, it is in our best interest to cooperate. Your orders will come directly from me or Admiral Pressman."

"Are you familiar with the Earth parables about serving two masters?" Garcia asked.

"I expect you to figure out how to satisfy our needs," Sheaar said. "I have spent too much of my own personal resources in this project. I need to see it succeed. Tell me now if I'm wasting my time on you. Can I trust you to serve the Klingon Empire, to root out its enemies wherever they lie, even if it is within my own government?"

"You're not wasting your time," Garcia said. "I want this."

"Good. Go to Pressman, learn how we are to recover the ship," Sheaar said.

"Return straight way with the information, and we will be on our way. You will need to choose a First Officer from the Klingon crew I personally hand picked for this mission. You can expect some fights out of that and some will no doubt try to increase their rank through assassination, but you must prevent this. You will not be getting crew replacements, or even normal crew rotations, as you would on a Star Fleet ship. What you get is what you get, and you will have to make do, so you must keep a tight reign on your crew. They will not like you for this and some will openly resist. They won't serve you if they think you're weak."

"I understand," Garcia said.

"Do you? You may have beaten Captain MaHt, but he is still defiant, and he would gut you if I didn't have his complete loyalty," Sheaar said. "There will be some in your crew like him and it would be better to kill them outright in an open challenge. Klingons understand this. It is our way. Tensions will run high on your ship as most of the time you will be silent running, in the dark, with no open communications. Klingons hate being cooped up on a ship for extended periods."

"We will find our way," Garcia said.

"I will not lose control of this project again," Admiral Sheaar said. "I would rather destroy it than let Pressman have it to himself."

"Why don't you?" Garcia asked.

“First, we are facing a threat that this ship was created to handle,” Sheaar said. “And, I want to know what transpired that got the crew killed. Pressman says my people mutinied. I don’t believe it. The answer is on the ship.”

“I’ll find out what happened,” Garcia said.

“Very well,” Sheaar said. Sheaar handed Garcia a communicator badge and Garcia was whisked immediately away by a transporter beam. He found himself in Admiral Pressman’s office. Pressman stopped his pacing and looked to Garcia.

“What did Sheaar say?” Pressman asked.

“He said he trusts me to command his ship,” Garcia said, playing Pressman to see how he’d respond.

“His ship?” Pressman asked. “There wouldn’t be a Starburst class starship if it weren’t for me. Watch yourself with him, Garcia. He’ll cut your throat and take the ship from you if he can.”

“That’s why you chose me?” Garcia asked. “Because I can hold my own in a fight?”

“I chose you for a lot of reasons. You’re an expert in holographic technologies, you’re a doctor, you can fight, you’re resilient, you like to win, and you can see through the politics and politically correct and coerced social paradigms that put the Federation at risks to threats like the Borg and the Cardassians. You would not have hesitated to kill the Borg to the last one, just like you didn’t hesitate to stop your Kelvan people from taking over the Galaxy. There is circumstantial evidence that Cardassia is preparing for full scale attack on the Federation and having good intel could make the difference between a full out war or simply some minor skirmishes. And that’s just on one of our borders. The obvious Romulan influence in the current instability of the Klingon Empire, and their recent attempt to capture Vulcan, suggests that we could expect trouble from the Romulans as well. Few people, especially the Romulans, would suspect that the Klingons and the Federation could work so well together as to have a ship with shared crew and interests. We have enemies and your job is to find them.”

“Like the nameless parasite thing that takes over its human host,” Garcia said.

Pressman shivered with the memory and unconsciously scratched the back of his neck. “I have not forgotten that or the fact that those creatures sent a message calling for reinforcements,” Pressman said. “If you can demonstrate that Klingons and Federation officers can work side by side, you could open up a whole new division in Star Fleet. Are you game?”

“I’ll have them line dancing together before the end of the month,” Garcia said.

“I would pay to see that,” Pressman said, handing him a PADD. “What I tell you next, is top secret.”

Garcia nodded.

“The Romulans have recently lost an outpost to the Borg,” Admiral Pressman said. “Several agents died bringing us this information. The outpost was a planet boasting a population of twenty two billion sentient life forms.”

“They lost the whole planet?” Garcia asked.

“By now the Borg have no doubt reached the geometric progression threshold of no return,” Pressman said. “Assuming one Borg assimilating one Romulan. Then Two Borg assimilating two Romulans. Four Borgs, sixteen, thirty two and so on. The planet is definitely lost. But what’s worse is the Borg have established orbital platforms to rip

the cities from the planet. Once in orbit, the material is used in the construction of Borg ships. The Intel we have suggests there are seven Borg ships currently in the making. One Borg ship nearly decimated our entire Fleet, so you can imagine what two or more of those ships will do when they go online.”

“Have the Romulans tried to do anything?” Garcia asked.

“They have sent Starships,” Pressman said. “But all that has done is provided more material for the Borg to use in their shipmaking venture. And more Borks. We have a weapon that will eliminate this threat. And, you now have a ship that can reach that sector of space instantaneously, using trans-warp drive. After you have successfully returned from this mission, you will use this transwarp technology and go to the Delta Quadrant, in search of the Borg home world, and destroy it. You will also destroy all Borg ships and worlds you encounter.”

“You want me to kill all of them?” Garcia asked.

“If you can,” Pressman said. “You needn’t worry about driving them to extinction. I am only hopeful that we can do sufficient damage that they will agree to finally leave us in peace.”

“Can this transwarp capable ship be recovered?” Garcia said. “Admiral Sheaar is concerned about the security system.”

“He should be,” Pressman said. “It’s killed everyone who has attempted to reclaim the ship without me being involved.”

“Isn’t that a bit extreme?” Garcia asked.

“I will not lose control of this project,” Pressman said.

“Admiral Sheaar shares that sentiment,” Garcia said. “Do you know what happened?”

“The Klingon portion of the crew mutinied, started killing the humans,” Pressman said. “My agent activated a security system which eliminated the threat.”

“What kind of security system?” Garcia asked.

“Have you ever heard the name Losira?” Admiral Pressman asked.

“The beautiful woman that tried to kill Kirk, McCoy, and Sulu?” Garcia asked.

“I am so glad I chose you,” Admiral Pressman said. “You know your history. Too many kids these days are history deficient.”

“You have a Kalandan computer system?” Garcia asked, incredulously.

“It’s a very sophisticated artificial intelligence, capable of holographic projections,” Admiral Pressman said.

“Yeah,” Garcia agreed. “Projections capable of fixating on particular chromosomal pattern in order to achieve kills at the cellular level.”

“Very effective,” Admiral Pressman said.

“And you unleashed this on the crew without their knowledge?” Garcia asked.

“It was necessary,” Admiral Pressman said. “You’ll find the information necessary for reclaiming the ship on this PADD, encrypted for your implant only. There are several ways to turn Losira off, but the fastest will be to simply get recognized by the system as an authorized user. It might be possible for you to use a Kelvan bracelet to temporarily suspend the Losira security system, but ultimately, you will have to reprogram the security system to recognize your authority.”

“You know the Kelvan bracelet only works when in the presence of a Kelvan computer system,” Garcia said.

“I do,” Pressman said, handing Garcia a modern Kelvan bracelet. “One of the engineers on the project was a Kelvan. He was one of my operatives in case something went wrong. You will have full access to the Kelvan computer when you’re in range of the ship. No one but you and me knows about this, so I shouldn’t have to tell you that it would be in your best interest to keep it a secret. In the event that you lose your bracelet, there are several Kelvan interface points strategically placed throughout the ship. You should take time to locate them. Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes. Once you’ve inserted your authorization files into the system you must confront the security interface. If the files aren’t in place when you confront the security system, you will be killed.”

“Where will I find the security interface?” Garcia asked.

“It will find you,” Pressman said. “Losira will appear as a holographic security officer. As soon as she does, you should engage it in conversation. In order to get full access to the ship, you will be required to pass a series of tests to prove your identity. The identifying sequence must be done in this order: auditory, tactile, retina scan, and finally, olfactory and genetic scans. So, you will speak out a key phrase for it to recognize your voice print, you will shake hands in order for it to get biometric readings and finger prints, then you will stare it in the eye for retina prints, and then finally, you will kiss it and it will identify your DNA and pheromones. If you do this sequence in any other order, you will die. Only the Captain’s profile will disable the security system after full scale lockdown.”

“Assuming the Kelvan computer is online, how do I update the security information?” Garcia asked.

“You’ll have to devise a plan for boarding the ship without getting killed,” Admiral Pressman said. “Reprogram the computer or change out a chip set with the memory chips that already have the information imprinted on it. The specs on the base and the Path Finder are available to you on your PADD. The crew profiles that I have assigned to you for the duration of this mission are on your PADD as well.”

Admiral Pressman extended his hand. Garcia took it.

“I’m counting on you,” Pressman said. “Is there anything else you can think of that you might need or want?”

“My roommates would be nice,” Garcia said.

“You got it,” Pressman said. “Recruit them. They need to be ready to go in twenty five minutes. Your supplies have already been sent up to Admiral Shear’s starship. Your Federation crew should arrive within fifteen minutes. Shear plans to leave as soon as they are on board.”

“Thanks,” Garcia said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Once on board the Klingon ship SaLing, Garcia was escorted back to the training room where he was to conduct his interviews for his First Officer. The Klingon who escorted him was one of the surviving honor guards who he had had a confrontation with earlier. The guard, TraGr, showed no animosity, or any other emotions, towards Garcia. He simply stood there and waited for his orders. A desk had been brought in for Garcia and on it was a Klingon PADD with an open database of the complete listing of his Klingon crew. Each had a picture, which seemed more like mug shots profiles, including a brief description of their abilities. Sheaar had done Garcia a favor by highlighting his preferred candidates for the First Officer position, for it also revealed a bias.

“TraGr, fetch me Jerard,” Garcia requested.

TraGr bowed and departed. While TraGr was gone, he made a quick call to home and caught Kletsova.

“Hey!” Kletsova said. “Are you okay? Everyone’s talking about why you collapsed after the performance, which was awesome by the way. I mean, the performance, not the fact that you passed out. A lot of people expected to see you at our graduation party. Where are you? Are you still in a hospital? What happened?”

“I’m okay, Tanya,” Garcia said, Tanya being the English short form of Tatiana. “You and Trini are about to receive orders. Just thought I would give you a heads up. They’re giving me a ship.”

“Who’s giving you a ship?” Kletsova asked.

“Just get packed. You and Trini are being placed under my command,” Garcia said. “Our mission may be a bit boring, for the most part, cloak and dagger kind of stuff, with a few moments of intense danger, so bring a book or general media database for the boring times.”

“Define boring,” Kletsova said.

“I expect we’ll be sitting in deep space listening for and monitoring phone calls from ET,” Garcia said. “Mostly silent running, looking for things that go bump in the night. Based on my cursory glance of the crew compliments, it appears most of the crew has a propensity for code decryption and language skills. Some smart people, to say the least. I want you both with me. And you need to be ready in ten minutes. I’m sorry for the rush, but that’s the way it is. I really want you with me.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Kletsova said.

“Yes would be nice,” Garcia said. “If you can stand me as your Captain.”

“Yes!” Kletsova said. “And I think I am safe saying yes for Trini, too. You can count on us.”

“Great. Contact me directly, this frequency, and I’ll have you beamed up,” Garcia said. “Also, do me a favor. Grab the chest at the foot of my bed and bring it with you. I’m going to be pretty busy for the next couple of hours and won’t be able to see you until we’re well on our way. And hush hush, no one knows about this, and I want to keep it that way.”

“Alright,” Kletsova said. “Anything else?”

TraGr entered with Jerard. TraGr stopped at the door while Jerard walked several steps forward. He stood casually and appeared bored to the point of being contemptuous.

Garcia smiled at Kletsova, her head framed on the PADD on the desk. "That'll be all. See you soon," Garcia said and closed out the communication. He was going to need some friends and he had no greater allies than Kletsova and Trini. He wished Afu and Lenar were still alive.

Jerard smiled as Garcia came around to greet him, ready to shake hands and be diplomatic. Jerard was taken completely by surprise by Garcia's attack. His feet were swept out from under him and as he fell he was hit in the neck by an open palm. On the floor, he found Garcia's knee on his neck, effectively pinning him to the ground.

"How dare you insult me like that," Garcia said. "The next time you stand before your Captain, you will assume an attention or parade rest posture, is that understood?"

Jerard nodded.

"I'm letting you live so that you can tell the others I will not tolerate this lackadaisical approach to my authority," Garcia said. "Now, get out of here before I change my mind and kill you."

Garcia stood up, purposely turned his back to Jerard and waited to hear the patter of his little Klingon feet as he made his exit. Jerard stood, his hand on his neck, unsure of what to make of Garcia's back to him. He concluded Garcia was a fool and attacked. Garcia greeted the attack as play and shuffled Jerard back to the floor, twisting the Klingon's arm in the process until he heard it snap. Simultaneously with the snap, Garcia put a boot in Jerard's stomach. Garcia leaned into Jerard and directed the Klingon's face towards TraGr.

"You see that honor guard over there," Garcia asked.

Jerard's eyes were large, but he nodded, unable to move from the pain as Garcia continued to twist on his arm.

"I recently was in a sparring match with him and seven other guards, and Captain Maht to boot. I think it fair to warn you that I held my own," Garcia said. "Would you say that is a fair statement, TraGr?"

"You held your own," TraGr said. "I will fight along side you any day."

"Thank you, TraGr," Garcia said. "Jerard, do you need any further schooling, or are you ready to comply with my authority, given to me by Admiral Sheaar?"

"I'm leaving now," Jerard said.

"TraGr, if you'll escort my guest here to the infirmary, and then fetch me LirShak," Garcia said.

TraGr bowed and escorted the injured Jerard from the training room. He returned with LirShak. LirShak had obviously heard about Jerard's condition and consequently stood at attention.

"At ease," Garcia said, after a moment of inspection. "Tell me, LirShak, what would make you a good first officer?"

LirShak smiled, as only a Klingon could. "I will protect you from the others," LirShak said.

Garcia smiled, pleasantly, and then threw a punch. LirShak blocked it, arm trapping arm. LirShak smiled graciously. Garcia's fist had closed a centimeter from impacting LirShak's face. Garcia nodded, approvingly, and when he pulled his arm out of the block, his fist opened and latched on to LirShak's arm. The next thing LirShak knew was that he was on the floor, chest down, his face squashed with Garcia adding pressure.

"I don't think I need your protection," Garcia said. "Get out of here."

LirShak got up and acted as if he were to walk away, but instead launched a foot in an attempt to kick Garcia. Garcia caught the foot, twisted, and sent LirShak back to the floor, only this time with a broken leg.

"TraGr, is it going to be like this all day?" Garcia asked.

"It is our way," TraGr said.

Indeed, all of the interviews ended in a fight. Some of the Klingon's even got in some lucky blows in and Garcia was sporting the bruises to prove it. The next candidate of note to arrive was a female Klingon. She entered proudly and stood for inspection. Her armor was in good condition, but not too polished for fear she would be accused of having never been in battle. Both she and her armor had scars suggesting that she was indeed a warrior to be weary of.

"Why are you here, Kitara?" Garcia asked her.

"I wish to serve as your First Officer," Kitara said.

"Please. In the history of Klingon, there has not been a female first officer, at least, that I'm aware of," Garcia said. "Hell, if I'm not mistaken, a hundred years ago females were not even allowed on board a warship."

"True," Kitara said. "The sociological term I have heard you use is a glass ceiling."

"You have heard me use this?" Garcia asked.

"I have viewed some of your sociology lectures and have read your books," Kitara said.

"Why?" Garcia asked.

"To understand you. To better serve you," Kitara said.

"You mean, you just started reading my books, then," Garcia corrected her.

"I have read your books before, seeking to understand the Human perspective on Klingons," Kitara said. "Since you first came on board the SaLing, I have been downloading and viewing material concerning you personally. The glass ceiling subject line intrigued me, so I followed the link."

"What do you hope to get here? Do you think you can just come in here and kiss my ass and I would just give you the First Officer position?" Garcia demanded.

A flash of anger crossed her face, but she held her tongue until her rage was manageable. "Permission to speak freely, Sir?"

"Go ahead," Garcia said.

"I'm not going to kiss your ass, or in any other way seek out a position I have not earned. I should have been promoted to First Officer several times over, but always I am transferred to other ships and each time I must start all over again, working my way up the chain of command, fighting to serve. You, as a Human, are not biased by a male female division of labor. Your species has overcome this and recognize that both male and female as individuals can exceed the expectations of the general stereotypes. Consequently, you allow everyone the opportunity to succeed. That's all I want. An opportunity to demonstrate that I, as an individual, can perform beyond the generalized expectations. It may be true that the average female Klingon is not cut out to be a warrior, but there are those who can hold their own with the best of the male warriors. By you giving me this chance to prove to you my worth, you will be giving all female Klingons throughout the Empire hope that they too can one day be treated as equals."

"You would put your entire culture at risk of collapse by trampling over tradition?" Garcia asked.

"If our species is going to survive in this modern galaxy, then we need to adapt," Kitara said.

"And how do you think the crew will react to me making you my first officer," Garcia asked.

"There will be resistance," Kitara said. "They already perceive you as a weak human. It will not help your image choosing a weak female. Some may even see it as an insult."

"Give me your opinion of Latoris, who interviewed before you," Garcia said.

Kitara snorted. "He's fine, if you want a back stabbing, kiss ass," she said.

"And Tokoro?"

"A Romulan sympathizer," Kitara scowled.

"What proof do you have of that?" Garcia asked.

"He's in the Brig, isn't he?" Kitara asked.

"He's in the Brig because he tried to cut me with a poisoned knife," Garcia said.

"That's my proof," Kitara said.

"Circumstantial," Garcia said.

"Our way is not to use poison, but strength and courage. A true Klingon would not stab you in the back," Kitara said.

"Then explain why you go around in cloaked ships," Garcia said.

"We would have lost the war with the Romulans had we not adapted our strategies to match theirs," Kitara said.

"And now you're at an impasse with the Romulans and your peace treaty is nothing more than a temporary truce," Garcia said.

"Yes," Kitara said. "It is not a true peace. Our enemy lies unconquered."

"I can interpret that statement to mean you still perceive humans as an enemy," Garcia said.

"No," Kitara said. "Humans have the capacity to fight with honor. They have demonstrated that to us over and over. On the whole, they fight for justice, something Klingons agree on philosophically. We may disagree on how to get there, but we agree on that. And, most importantly, humans leave us alone to live our lives as we see fit. That is honorable."

"Why were you marked as a candidate for first officer?" Garcia asked.

"Because I am the best tactical officer in the Empire. Everyone knows it. I have been passed to nearly every ship in the fleet," Kitara said.

"Instead of transferring you, why don't they just kill you?" Garcia asked. "Isn't that the Klingon way, eliminate the competition?"

"They have tried," Kitara said. She smiled.

"And if you were my First Officer, would you attempt to kill me to self promote to Captain?" Garcia asked.

"At the first display of weakness, I will take command," Kitara assured him.

"What if I were in a life or death struggle, would you intervene?" Garcia asked.

"It depends," Kitara said.

"Explain."

"If it is a matter of honor, I will not intervene," Kitara said. "But if it is a fight to the death with an enemy, I will fight beside you, even at my own peril, unless otherwise ordered not to."

"So, you can follow orders," Garcia asked.

"Sometimes," Kitara said.

"Can you obey a human?" Garcia asked.

"Species is irrelevant. Gender is irrelevant," Kitara said. "The only relevance is honor and intent."

"I suppose you want to challenge me to a fight," Garcia said.

"No," Kitara said.

"No?" Garcia said, surprised. "Why not?"

"It wouldn't be a fair fight," Kitara said.

"Explain."

"I know of your abilities. There is no honor or benefit in destroying you," Kitara said. She was not bragging, but stating a fact as she saw it.

"That confident," Garcia said.

"If you are ready to die, I will not turn down an official challenge," Kitara said.

"But it is not the only reason I don't wish to fight you."

"Explain," Garcia said, suspecting her answer but wanting to hear her express it. He could sense her intelligence and could see the intensity in her eyes.

"By serving as your First Officer, I can prove my value to the Klingon Empire," Kitara said. "If I destroy you now, I will most likely not have this opportunity."

"You really want to prove something?" Garcia asked.

"All warriors do," Kitara said.

"I'm not impressed by proving things to others," Garcia said.

"I don't seek this position to prove to others," Kitara said. "I do this to prove to myself that what I know to be true is so."

"You talk too much. I want you to fight me," Garcia said. "Stop short of killing me."

Kitara nodded, a slight smile on her face, always eager to prove herself. "Do you wish to remain conscious?"

"Yes," Garcia said, chuckling.

"Any other limits?" Kitara asked.

"Such as?"

"No broken bones, visible scars or bruises?" Kitara asked.

"Just don't kill me," Garcia instructed her.

Garcia took a step back and completely relaxed. He noticed Kitara tensing, preparing for battle, and seeing Garcia relaxing, she took a step back. "You are not taking this challenge seriously."

"Why do you say that?" Garcia asked. "Bring it on."

"You have assumed the body posture of someone who is relaxed, relaxed almost to the point of being drunk or sedated," Kitara said. "I will not fight you if you're going to be disrespectful to the art."

"I submit to you that my relaxed fighting style will beat your tense fighting style," Garcia said. "Relaxed muscles have more speed. And further, if you will look at crash accidents where there are inebriated people involved, you will find that those who were

drunk survived the crash without even a scratch, while those who were not drunk sustained injuries. The reason for this is that those who are inebriated flow with the accident, where the non inebriated people tensed their muscles, bracing for impact, and compounded their injuries.”

“Then perhaps instead of airbags and inertia dampeners, we should inject people with valium before an accident,” Kitara said.

“Cute,” Garcia said, wondering why everyone wants to make that joke. “Are you going to talk me to death, or are you going to fight.”

“Come a little closer,” Kitara motioned.

“If you wait for me to come to you, I’ve won,” Garcia said.

At that, Kitara initiated the sparring match with the first strike. She proved flexible, fast, and tough. When the sparring match went past the two minute mark, she became more focused and determined, as if she had been merely playing prior to that mark. Garcia noticed her breathing become more intense and her attacks more precise, and though he was holding his own, he was going to have to end the fight or start worrying about exhaustion getting the best of him. He had already been in a dozen small sparring matches, so his energy was already waning, not to mention his interview. The obvious difference between Kitara and the others was that she had started off with exploratory strikes to get a feel for Garcia’s rhythm, style, and tactics. The others had just come straight on with brute force for a killing blow and Garcia had used their own energies against them. Kitara was studying him, adapting her style to match his. And she had a chance of winning.

Garcia allowed her to flow into him as she attacked and attempted to pin her. He ended up on his back, her knee on his neck and his arm in a joint lock.

“Satisfied?” Kitara asked.

To her surprise, Garcia broke free, pulling his shoulder out of alignment to get out of the joint lock. He swept her down to the floor and grasped her neck. She thrust from her hips and they rolled, so that she ended up back on top. She put an elbow into his ribs and bared down on him with her weight. He clapped her ears and when she pulled back, he rolled away from her. He hit the table with his shoulder to put it back into place so he could use it again. He came up just in time to get hit dead center of the nose. He went down, but managed to blindly sweep her legs out from under her, bringing her down on top of him. He used his head and butted her in the face. Blood dripped from her nose, but she didn’t give up her position. She leaned into his neck. He shifted and rolled and they both ended up in a stalemate, neither willing to withdraw or surrender their position.

Garcia slapped the floor with his free hand and she eased up on his arm, but did not allow him to pull free.

“Do I have the job?” Kitara asked.

“If I say no?” Garcia asked, wondering if she would simply break his arm out of spite.

Kitara released him, stood, and started to walk away.

“Wait,” Garcia said.

Kitara turned and paused. “I thought humans were more socially advanced, but you are just like the males in my own species. Embarrassed because I beat you in a fair fight.”

“You beat me?” Garcia said.

"I could have killed you easily," Kitara said.

"At best this was a tie," Garcia said.

"Believe what you want," Kitara said. "But had this been a fight to the death and I were not holding back, you would be dead."

"May I speak now?" Garcia asked.

She blew air in contempt. "I hope better than you can fight."

"As my First Officer, your first duty is to train with me, once a week," Garcia said, getting up. He grimaced, quite certain his nose was broken, again. He explored it tentatively, went beyond certain it was broken, and then manipulated it back into alignment. "I'd like to learn from you. Also, you are to help me get up to speed with Klingon culture. Educate me along the way if you perceive in me a lack of understanding. Meet me in my quarters in one hour so that we can go over the rest of the crew assignments together. We'll discuss our primary mission objective at that time."

Garcia departed, leaving a bewildered Kitara behind. Her surprise quickly grew into satisfaction and she roared in jubilation at the ceiling, towards her idea of heaven, Sto-Vo-Kor.

Outside of the training room, Captain MaHt intercepted Garcia. "The Admiral wants to see you in his quarters. Are you through with the interviews?"

"I am," Garcia said, wiping the blood from his face on his sleeve.

"Let me guess, another Klingon is on his way to medical?" Captain MaHt said.

"No, actually," Garcia said. "This one demonstrated more discipline, so I was able to demonstrate some restraint."

MaHt scowled. "You and I will battle again and you will not be as lucky."

"Until that day, may your battles be challenging," Garcia said.

MaHt nodded, almost approvingly. "This way."



"Have you chosen a First Officer?" Admiral Sheaar said.

"I have," Garcia said. "Lt. Kitara."

"She will serve you well," Admiral Sheaar said.

"I am surprised to hear you say so," Garcia said.

"Why? If I have evolved sufficiently to work with humans, why would I not accept a female of my own species as a superior option to that?" Admiral Sheaar asked. "Did Pressman tell you about the security system?"

"He did," Garcia said. "There are two ways to do it. Both ways require us to board the ship. We can board the ship and destroy the Losira computer system or we can reprogram it to recognize new security profiles. Since timeliness is paramount, the fastest way to reprogram the computer will be to exchange a chip set in one of the security subsystems. I can imprint a number of memory chips, pass them out to a small boarding party, and the first one to the computer banks get to exchange the chip set. At that time, I will be able to interface with the security system and shut it down."

"Boarding the ship will not be easy," Sheaar said. "I have lost two ships to it already. It's like a ghost."

"Losira is basically a hologram," Garcia said. "The difference being is that it actually generates real matter. The holographic agent, or agents, have a transport range of up to sixty thousand kilometers. The agents are pre-programmed for particular

assignments, such as sabotaging the warp core or killing a person. That means each agent is limited to its one mission objective. We can use that in our favor.”

“And how do you propose to get your boarding party on the ship?” Sheaar asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said. “I was hoping to discuss that with you, my first officer, and Captain Maht. The space station is a hollowed out asteroid. Even if we were to open the main entrance into the station, the Losira security program will no doubt blast the first ship that enters the tunnel leading to the heart of the base. And we can’t beam onto the ship while the base anti-transporter fields are up and running. The inside of the base was designed to be pressurized to facilitate the construction of the starship. There is a pressure relief valve and vent tunnel that a small party could pass through, single file. From there, we could rappel over to the ship and enter through an emergency exit.”

“I know the vent tunnel you are referring to,” Admiral Sheaar said. “It will not allow a person in a spacesuit to pass through. Suits are too bulky.”

“I know,” Garcia said. “We’ll have to use life belts.”

Admiral Sheaar nodded approval. “Did you bring any?”

“They’re in my supply manifest and should have already been beamed up,” Garcia said. “I assume you have tethers and rappelling gear?”

“Yes,” Sheaar said.

“Can the security agents be killed?” Sheaar asked.

“I don’t think so. They’ll be immune to phasers,” Garcia said. “They can be blocked from their task. If they are unable to reach their target, they will self terminate after a predetermined time. Admiral Pressman programmed the Losira security system to only recognize the Captain’s profile for disengaging the security system after a full alert. That part can only be reprogrammed after it has been disabled or deactivated. I will fix that to include members of my crew, you, and Admiral Pressman, just in case this ever happens again.”

“Very good,” Admiral Sheaar said. “I will make sure that you survive to do your job. You’re free to go.”

“I’d like to ask you a question,” Garcia said. “The ship specs are incomplete and there is nothing on this new weapon system. Do you have that information?”

“You have heard of the Genesis device?” Admiral Sheaar asked.

“An invention of the late Carol Marcus,” Garcia said. “It was a device which was supposed to create environments that could sustain life as we know it. The device failed to deliver as promised due to the compulsory ingredient of proto matter. The device did create livable environments, even created life itself, but the addition of proto matter caused the life to evolve at accelerated rates. The accelerated evolutionary rates also applied to non living systems, causing the affected planetary systems to self destruct within weeks of detonating the device. The last recorded use of the device turned an entire nebula into a functional solar system that completely destroyed itself after nine months. It also caused an interstellar incident that nearly brought the Federation and Klingon Empire to war. The Federation Klingon treaty expressly forbids any further research and development of the device by either party.”

“No doubt you have some concerns about the legalities of what we have done, then,” Sheaar said.

“That’s the weapon system you want me to use on the Borg?” Garcia asked, dumbfounded.

"It will be an effective weapon against them," Admiral Sheaar said.

"A bit of over kill, don't you think? It's the equivalent of Custer bringing a nuclear weapon to an Indian raid," Garcia said.

"The one thing I don't like about humans is that you always want to talk your way out of a fight," Admiral Sheaar said. "There are enemies that do not want to talk, that will not negotiate until you have demonstrated your superior fighting abilities, and even then, you should be wary of your enemy for they will learn how to circumvent your defenses, and then they will assimilate you. Your weakness as a species is not accepting the fact that not all life forms are agreeable and compatible. In this relationship, I will draw the boundaries, you will defend them."

"Fine, you can use it against a Borg ship, but only if you engage them outside of a solar system," Garcia said. "If detonated a Genesis Device too close to a star or planet, you can kiss that star or planet good bye."

"Indeed," Admiral Sheaar said. "Hence the name, Project Starburst. And you now understand why this project must remain top secret."

"Top secret? It shouldn't exist at all!" Garcia said.

"I've more information for you," Admiral Sheaar said. "I now know who is responsible for the loss of the Path Finder's original crew."

Garcia simply waited for Admiral Sheaar to continue.

"The Other Klingons," Admiral Sheaar said.

"The ones that I wrote about in my book? The ones from Kirk's day. The Klingons who resemble humans?" Garcia asked.

"The same," Admiral Sheaar said.

"Which group? The humanoids that Klingons conquered and forced into service, or the Klingons that were genetically modified to appear human?" Garcia asked.

"It is hard to tell. The two groups have mixed their DNA over the last hundred years, so much so that the point is irrelevant," Admiral Sheaar said. "All I know is one of my agents has contacted me and he claims that the Other Klingons have one of the Starbursts from the Path Finder."

"Did he tell you who they were and where they've taken it?" Garcia said.

"No. He was killed while in the process of sending me the message," Admiral Sheaar said. "They no doubt had a spy on board the Path Finder or on the space station during the construction process. I suspect their intent was to take the ship, but when they failed, they took one of the weapons."

"Do they know what they have?" Garcia asked.

"I don't think so. They probably believe it is just a prototype weapon to use against the Borg. If they knew it was a derivative of the Genesis Device weapon, I suspect they would have used it already, or at least attempted to blackmail the Federation by now."

"Bloody hell," Garcia said. "Do you realize what you and Pressman have done?"

"I know Pressman is hot for you to go and take out the Borg at TelKiar, but I believe your first mission is to recover any stolen technology from the Path Finder," Admiral Sheaar said. "You must find these terrorists and eliminate them before they use the weapon against one of our two nations."

"I hope we can," Garcia said.

“This Losira security system will have stored information on those responsible?” Admiral Sheaar asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said. “Which means destroying it is no longer an option. It has to be reprogrammed. And I will have to be there to shut her down.”

Admiral Sheaar stepped closer. “You are still faithful to the project?”

“My job is to defend the Federation and Klingon Empires from their enemies,” Garcia said. “I will not fail.”

Admiral Sheaar roared triumphantly, gripping Garcia’s shoulders and shaking him.

♪♪▶

The temporary quarters for the Federation personnel shared a common room that split into nine rooms. Each room had four bunks, two on each side. There was a room with a communal shower and toilets, which left absolutely no room for the privacy that Star Fleet Officers’ were use to. Most everyone had introduced themselves, but they were still testing each other to see if anyone was holding back information about their situation. The highest ranking officer was a female Zalden, First Lt. Zara Undine. She flexed her hands, revealing her webbed fingers as she paced.

“I don’t like this,” Undine said. “No one told me we were beaming up onto a Klingon ship. And where is Garcia? He should be here to brief us.”

“What I would like to know is who made Garcia Captain,” First Lt. Gomez said. “I’ve met him in passing on the Enterprise and my understanding is he still has yet to finish the Academy.”

There were two non Star Fleet people present. One was Rivan and she was holding a cat. The other was a Martian, of Earth descent. The feature that made the Martian stand out was his height. He was 213 centimeters tall, which had him towering over all the humans. It was an awkward kind of tallness, which had him stooping to get through doors. His height was due to the fact that he was born “off the grid.” Off the grid, in Martian terms, meant he was born in a colony that had been formed on Mars before the discovery of artificial gravity. Colonist who stayed on Mars past a year could never return to Earth due to the change in their physiology, living under less than normal Earth gravity. Those colonist that had kids found that their kids grew in height because they didn’t have Earth gravity pulling them down. Everything on Mars grew bigger than it did on Earth, off the grid. The colonies after the discovery of artificial gravity laid down a grid work to alter the gravity in their living space, so that they could return to Earth and work on Earth ships. Anyone born off the grid that wanted to go to earth or be on a ship with Earth normal gravity required extensive weight and load bearing training, as well as technological assists. The Martian wore an antigravity belt to ease any discomfort he might have felt. The belt made an annoying humming noise, which drew more attention to him than he wanted. To make matters worse, he was blind, and he wore one of the older style seeing impaired devices, a visual net which draped over his outer most garment. The net had thousands of electronic sensors which gave him the ability to “see” a complete three dimensional view of his world and with perfect clarity when it came to perceiving distance.

“He will tell us what we need to know when he wants to,” Marvin Smith said. No one dared to make fun of his name, Marvin the Martian. It wouldn’t be nice to pick on a

blind man. "Isn't that the way with you military types?" But that would probably change if he continued to demonstrate a hostile personality type.

"Why are you here?" Gomez asked, not liking the fact that he was grouping all of the Officers under "military types."

"I am here to facilitate communications between Dryac and the Captain," Marvin said. "Dryac is a Medusan, so unless you wish to be driven completely insane, I recommend no one enter room six unannounced."

"Why do we need a Medusan?" Undine asked. "All of this is very peculiar."

"And uncomfortable," Trini said. "I thought we would at least get a bed."

"At least you can lie down on your table," Marvin said, continuing to gripe. "There is not even enough space for me to lie down in the room. I will have to bed out here on the floor."

"Well, I doubt the Klingons would accommodate us on comfort regardless of our species requirement," McKnight said.

Sendak stirred from what appeared to be a meditative pose. "Perhaps someone could contact Garcia via his implant. If he is too busy to speak directly, he may still be able to send text messages. He is capable of multi-tasking."

Trini pulled out a PADD. "PADD, log onto the Klingon computer ship net and transmit to Garcia. Ask him if he's available to speak with us."

The words, "I am. Go Trini." Scrolled across her PADD, and she read them out loud.

Everyone who wasn't sleeping gathered around to read over her shoulder and they all had questions. Trini stopped them. "Please, one at a time. Tam, we would like to see you."

"I'm having dinner with the Admiral. I will see you all shortly," Garcia said.

"Well, that's great for you, but we're tired, we're anxious, and we want information, and one of us requires better accommodations. You are aware that Marvin, the communications facilitator for the Medusan is over seven feet tall?"

"Dryac is a member of the crew, with rank and title. I would prefer no one refer to her as the Medusan," Garcia said. "Stand by. I have notified our First Officer to come and speak with you. In the mean time, try and stay calm. As soon as she and I have gone over the crew roster, we'll start handing out assignments and positions. She and I are kind of putting this together as we go. Give my compliments to Mr. Smith and Dryac, and inform them they can have the quarters assigned to me and appropriate bedding will be provided for Mr. Smith. Inform him whatever Dryac's needs are, she will be accommodated. I will bunk with all of you until we arrive at our destination. I got to go. Garcia out."

"She?" Undine asked. "The first officer is a she? God, I hope it's not Shelby."

The door to the Federation crew's common room opened and Kitara walked in. She seemed unhappy to have been disturbed and Undine was wondering if her comment about Shelby was premature. Kitara introduced herself:

"Captain Garcia has asked me to see to your comfort while on board this ship," Kitara said. "I will do what I can, but I must warn you, though this ship came prepared to treat you humanely, many of the items Garcia has mentioned are considered luxuries, and are not available."

The Andorian, Doctor Misan, approached Kitara. "You are sporting what appear to be several recent injuries. Would you like medical attention?"

"If I wanted medical attention, I would have sought medical attention," Kitara said.

Trini looked to Kletsova. The look said everything: "What have we gotten ourselves into?"

Ambassador Clemmons, the cat that had been quite comfortable in Rivan's lap, decided to hop down and go scent mark Kitara's boot.

"You brought a cat on board!?" Kitara said.

"Pets are welcomed aboard Starfleet vessels," McKnight said.

"And not unheard of on Klingon ships," Undine pointed out.

"Look," Trini said. "I think I speak for all of us when I say that mostly we just want some information. We were really expecting to beam up to a Star Fleet ship, but we found ourselves here, instead."

"I understand that," Kitara said. "I, too, would like to know why we have all been drawn together. I do not have the information to give you. I suspect that we won't know the true nature of our mission until we are on board the Path Finder."

"The Path Finder?" Gomez asked.

"The name of our ship," Kitara said.

"Well, see, that is useful information," Trini said. "That sounds like a nice name for a ship. The USS Path Finder. Is it one word?"

"In Klingon, it is one word," Kitara said. "And it is not USS. It is a Klingon ship."

"A Klingon ship?" Undine repeated.

"Garcia said I could have his quarters," Marvin said.

"Yes," Kitara said. "I am over ruling that. A bed of adequate proportions will be brought into this common room. You will have to make due, for now."

"I don't think you have the authority to over rule him," Marvin said.

Kitara smiled and stepped forwards, menacingly. "I will not allow the Captain to bunk with subordinates," Kitara said. "Nor, will I allow him to give up the privileges of his rank. You will have to make due. Now, is there anything else that you require that was not on the list provided me?"

"We want to speak with Garcia," Gomez said.

"I will let him know you wish to speak with him," Kitara said. "For now, just settle in and make yourselves comfortable."

CHAPTER NINE

First Officer Kitara met Garcia as he was coming out of the Admiral's quarters. "We need to talk," Kitara said. "Follow me."

Garcia followed her to a room that was fairly spacious, had a bunk, several chairs, a work station, Klingon armor fastened to a half mannequin, and exercise equipment.

"This is your quarters," Kitara said. "The others have been adequately accommodated. It was inappropriate for you to offer up your quarters. You are the Captain and you will keep up appearances, if not for your own people, then for the Klingons."

"The general rule of my command will be that I will not ask others to do what I am not willing to do myself," Garcia said.

"That is a fine rule," Kitara said. "None the less, this is your quarters. Now, we should discuss the chain of command. I have reviewed your recommendations you provided me via your implant and wish to negotiate."

"I think I need a small break," Garcia said. "I've been busy with the Admiral, devising a plan to board the Path Finder, putting the crew together, and trying to memorize ship specs. It has been non stop all day, minus the time I was out cold due to injuries sustained in my initial interview. I'm tired. We have four days of travel to arrive at the Path Finder, I think you can spare me two hours."

"The sooner we figure out a chain of command, the sooner everyone will know their place," Kitara said. "Your Feds are already showing signs of distress, mostly from a lack of knowledge."

Garcia sighed. "Very well," he said. He grabbed a chair and sat down in it backwards. "Let's do this."

"Good. I recommend Jurak for the position of chief medical officer," Kitara said.

"Um, I think Doctor Misan is expecting to be chief medical officer," Garcia said. "I believe the humans will be more comfortable with his beside manner than Jurak's."

"Jurak is a better doctor," Kitara said. "That, and there are more Klingons than humans. Your humans will have to learn to deal."

"Jurak is a professional hunter," Garcia said. "To me that is a conflict of interest."

"His medical skills and reputation comes from him being a professional hunter," Kitara said. "Further, his family is friends with Sheaar's family."

"We are not going to award positions based on what family's is friendly with whom," Garcia said. "It will be based on ability."

"You may not like the fact that he hunts, but you can't argue that he is a better doctor than Misan," Kitara said.

Garcia was quiet for a long moment. "Very well. Jurak will be the chief medical officer, for now. I reserve the right to change this."

"Of course," Kitara said. "You are the Captain. The science officer should be Klathas."

"I prefer Sendak," Garcia said.

"He is only recently graduated. Surely you do not intend to put your young friends in positions of authority they have not earned," Kitara said.

"No, but Sendak is overwhelming qualified for the science position," Garcia said. "And I would like Lt. Commander Undine to be primary Ops, and third in command."

“She is, at least, qualified for those positions,” Kitara said. “And though I suspect she can hold her own in a fight, I recommend you find a Klingon to be third in command.”

“I want her there, and while we’re on the subject of who is where, we will not have any advancement through assassinations on my ship,” Garcia said.

“I can not guarantee that,” Kitara said.

“Oh, yes you can, and you will. We both will make it very clear, there will be no assassinations while I’m in command, do you understand me?” Garcia asked.

“I do,” Kitara said, and pointed by saying “no assignments on my ship” might be interpreted that it was okay to assignate the Captain.

“I trust you have my back,” Garcia said.

“For now,” Kitara said. “Why do we have a Medusan on board?”

“We will be engaged in silent running maneuvers,” Garcia said. “Which means sometimes we will even be running with minimum or no sensors. Dryac, as a Medusan, always knows where she is in time and space.”

“Ahh, we can run blind,” Kitara said, nodding. “We could even hide and navigate through a Nebula or particulate cloud of pre stellar dust, where sensors might be inop. Excellent.”

“What’s up with the Nausicans?” Garcia asked.

“The Kolar squad?” Kitara asked. “They are military elite commandos recruited by Sheaar himself. They are loyal to the Klingon Empire, raised on a Klingon occupied world. Treat them as if they are Klingons and you’ll earn their respect.”

“Fine. I want Lt. Gomez to be the Chief Engineer,” Garcia said.

“I want Omlar,” Kitara said.

“Gomez is a warp and phase expert,” Garcia said.

“This is primarily a Klingon ship,” Kitara said. “It will have Klingon technology.”

“It’s a hybrid, actually, Klingon and Federation technology,” Garcia said, handing her a PADD. “Here are the specs.”

“So, we will need both Federation and Klingon engineers working in tandem?” Kitara said.

“We need everyone working together,” Garcia said.

“What is our primary mission?” Kitara asked.

“The most immediate priority is to recover a weapon that was stolen from the Path Finder,” Garcia said. “They’re called Starbursts and each has sufficient destructive power to destroy an entire solar system.”

Kitara gave Garcia her full attention. She seemed skeptical, but attentive. “What sort of weapon has that kind of power?” Kitara asked.

“Ever heard of the Genesis Device?” Garcia asked.

“It is a banned weapon!” Kitara said. “The Federation would risk war with the Klingon Empire revitalizing this technology?”

“It was a joint effort between the Klingon and Federation,” Garcia said.

“This is not possible,” Kitara said.

“Sheaar is involved with it,” Garcia assured her. “And the Other Klingons are the prime suspect for having stolen the weapon.”

Kitara grew quiet.

"Lt.?" Garcia asked.

"Have you told anyone else?" Kitara asked.

"No. You're the first," Garcia said.

"Do not share this with anyone else," Kitara urged.

"I can't keep it a secret from the crew," Garcia said. "It's our primary mission."

"We will have enough issues integrating the crew," Kitara said. "This knowledge could be divisive amongst the Klingons. Trust me. Do not share this with anyone, for now. Give me time to gauge the crew as a whole. We can not afford to start this mission with a mutiny. If what you say is true, we need to find this weapon before anyone uses it. Even if no one is killed from it being detonated, the fact that it exists at all could start a war between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. It leaves a very distinctive finger print and people will know what it was."

"I know," Garcia said. "Which makes our job all the more troubling. The Borg have taken control of a planet in the Tel Kiar system. Pressman and Sheaar want us to go and take out the Borg planet using this weapon before the Borg can complete construction on new Borg ships which will no doubt be used to assimilate the Federation and Klingon empires. I needn't remind you of the damage one Borg ship was capable of, now imagine seven."

"There will still be those of the crew who will object to the use of this weapon," Kitara said.

"I know," Garcia said. "That's why I have been ordered to do it and, ultimately, I will have to decide whether or not to comply with my orders or seek a higher authority on the matter. We'll keep this our secret for now. But eventually the crew will need to know."

"On a need to know basis," Kitara said. "Your science officer can be trusted to keep a secret?"

"Yes. He and I go way back," Garcia said. "He and T'Shanik will make a good team. Hopefully Klathos can learn to work with the Vulcans. If the three of them can work together, we will have a strong science department."

"Very well," Kitara said. "Undine will be third in command. Can you trust her?"

"I have not worked with her before," Garcia said. "I only know her through her profiles."

"And the fact that Admiral Pressman chose her doesn't add anything to her credentials," Kitara said.

"I can't condone that sort of thinking. After all, Admiral Sheaar recommended you," Garcia said. "I can't allow myself to hold everyone in suspicion."

"Agreed. We will go on face value until evidence suggests we do otherwise," Kitara said. "You're going to have to work hard to gain the confidence of your Klingon crew."

"One step at a time, Kitara," Garcia said.

Discussing the crew breakdown and first roster took them two hours, but only because they kept going off on tangents about the primary mission, what was known, what was unknown, and discussions of the ship they were to command. Garcia finally wrapped things up, knowing they could do nothing more but rely on the expert qualities each of their crew would bring to bear. Kitara departed to distribute assignments while Garcia took a necessary nap. He hadn't been joking when he said he had had a long day.

In his sleep, he chose to lucid dream. He called up the specs for the Path Finder and created a three dimensional model of the ship in his mind. The first obvious feature that must have had Klingon influence was that there was a cone section as opposed to a saucer section. The main fuselage, the drive section, was tear shaped, with the cone attached by a short bridge. The drive section had four wings which tapered off in a rakish way and supported the four warp nacelles. The warp nacelles were suspended just above a rotating drum by the wings. The large rotating drum was a sophisticated sensor array. The rotating drum itself was thin, with three axels that came attached to the aft of the main fuselage. The drum itself covered half of the main drive and was the same length as the engine nacelles. The surface of the drum was crisscrossed with a spider web pattern of fiber optic and superconducting networks that pulsed with glowing colors as if it were a live membrane. All in all, Garcia couldn't help but think that the Path Finder looked like a giant dart. The only thing it lacked was a sharp point at the end of the cone section.

The Path Finder consisted of nine decks, ten if you counted the single room at the upper most point of the cone a deck. That single room was the captain's ready room. Standing dead center of that room, and looking straight up, one could look out through a small observation blister. This blister, the upper most point of the ship, would most often be pointed in the direction of travel. With the floor perpendicular to the direction of travel, some people might be disoriented looking up and seeing movement, especially with artificial gravity adding to the illusion that one was standing still, but Garcia was not disturbed by this. He had no trouble understanding that he may not be oriented in the direction of travel and still be moving. Even on Earth he had a good sense of where he was in relationship to a moon and sun, even with everything always in motion. He remembered making himself dizzy as a kid trying to construct mental maps of the movement of the artificial moon, the Yonada spaceship, as it raced around the planet, the planet around the sun, the sun around the galaxy, the galaxy...

The Senior Officer's quarters would be the most spacious out of all the quarters, with Garcia's quarters the most spacious of all of them. Regular crew would be sharing rooms, four bunks to a room. The Klingons wouldn't mind, as they were use to lack of luxuries on their ships, but the Federation members were going to have a hard time adjusting. He made sure Kletsova and Trini shared a room and added Nurse Janet Cohen and computer tech assistant, Gao Hong. He would have to provide Dryac with officer's quarters, and she would share it with Marvin Smith, her human companion.

There were two entrances to the one shuttle bay and there were four shuttles stowed beneath the shuttle bay floors.

The ship specs were incomplete, but they did show one interesting upgrade. The replicator had a variable point delivery system. In other words, it was a site to site replicator. The days of getting up and going to collect your items were over. All a person had to do was specify where they would like a food or beverage item manifested, and the system would comply by beaming it directly to that specified point.

As Garcia inspected the Bridge in his lucid dream, he sat down in his command chair. He spun it around to take in the panoramic view and ordered a cup a coffee. A coffee cup appeared on the arm rest of his chair. He lifted it up to take a taste test and was suddenly awakened from his dream.

CHAPTER TEN

Garcia was aroused from his sleep by a persistent buzzing. He stood, put on his shirt, and said enter, turning to withdraw a hidden basin and potable water supply to wash his face. He had no sooner gotten his face wet when he heard Rivan's voice and felt her touch.

"Why haven't you come to see us?" Rivan asked.

Garcia gripped her shoulders and held her back, not believing his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"You're hurting me," Rivan said.

Garcia eased up on his grip. "Rivan, you can't be here."

"They said it would be alright," Rivan said.

Ambassador Clemmons made his presence known, rubbing up against him.

"Oh my god," Garcia said. "Rivan, no."

Garcia put on his boots.

"What's wrong?" Rivan asked. "I thought you would enjoy my company?"

"Your life is in danger," Garcia said. "You shouldn't be here."

"But," Rivan began.

"Don't leave my quarters," Garcia said and abruptly left.

He proceeded down the corridor at a good pace and rang the chime on Captain Maht door to his quarters. He actually answered.

"What do you want?" Captain Maht asked.

"I need you to take us back to Earth," Garcia said.

"Not happening," Captain Maht assured him.

"Then give me a shuttle," Garcia said.

"Sorry, can't do that, either," Captain Maht said.

"Then call Fleet and have someone arrange to meet us," Garcia said.

"No," Captain Maht said. "We are cloaked and I will not give away our position. What is this about?"

"Why did you beam up Rivan?" Garcia demanded. "She wasn't on the list."

Captain Maht chuckled. "You did not want your mate to travel with you?"

"She is not my mate," Garcia said.

"That's not what I hear," Captain Maht said. "Are you not the father of her child to be?"

"She doesn't belong here," Garcia said.

"Your problem, not mine," Captain Maht said.

"Please. Help me get her home," Garcia said.

Captain Maht smiled and closed his door on Garcia. Admiral Sheaar was even less receptive to Garcia's protest. Sheaar put Rivan's liability back on Garcia.

Garcia's next stop was the Federation's crew quarters. He entered the living area prepared to go off on a tirade. The number of Star Fleet Officers present made him keep his cool. Mr. Smith was asleep on a cot against one of the walls. Doctor Misan was playing cards with McKnight, Nurse Cohen, and Tatiana Kletsova. Trini was reading. The others were either roaming or sleeping.

"Captain on deck," Lt Undine announced.

Everyone went to their feet.

“At ease,” Garcia said, a bit flustered, having not anticipated that Undine, or anyone, might call them to attention. He was going to have to become accustomed to being Captain. “Kletsova, Sookanan, I would like to speak with you. Now.”

Garcia stepped back out into the corridor. A moment later, his two roommates, Kletsova and Trini emerged.

“What the devil were you thinking?” Garcia demanded.

“I suppose you’re referring to Rivan’s presence?” Kletsova said.

Garcia nodded emphatically.

“She wanted to come,” Trini said. “We didn’t think there would be any issues.”

“Did you not think there would be issues when you beamed up onto a Klingon ship?” Garcia asked.

“Yes, but they warped out of orbit as soon as we beamed up,” Kletsova said.

“Rivan’s family, Tam. And it is okay to bring family on a Star Fleet ship.”

“This isn’t a Star Fleet ship,” Garcia pointed out.

“Then maybe you should have told me that when you asked me to sign on with you,” Kletsova snapped.

“Tanya,” Trini said, trying to soften her friend’s tone a little.

“No, Trini, I am right on this,” Kletsova said. “He may be the Captain, but he will hear my opinion.”

Garcia bit his tongue for a moment, before acknowledging that Kletsova was right. “It will be awhile before we get back to Earth. I will expect both of you to help me keep her safe.”

Trini and Tatiana agreed and then Garcia pushed past them back into the room. “Lt. Sendak and Lt Undine, will you come with me, please,” Garcia said, more than asked. He departed again, waiting for them just outside the room. He escorted the two of them to a training room, in complete silence and indifference to their obvious curiosity. As they walked, he paged Kitara and Lt. Tuer to join them. Lt. Tuer was to be his chief of security, since Kitara approved, and he was there waiting when Garcia and party arrived. Lt. Kitara arrived right on Garcia’s heels.

“I thought you were napping,” Kitara said.

“I was,” Garcia said, and then he introduced everyone present, finishing with himself. “I’m Captain Tammis Parkin Arblaster-Garcia.” It suddenly hit him. He was a Captain. How many times had he called himself that in fantasy, games on the holodeck, and not once had it echoed through him like it did at just that particular moment.

Garcia proceeded to catch everyone up to speed on their objective of retaking the Path Finder, giving them specs on the space station and on the ship, as well as the Losira computer system. Garcia and Kitara had already picked the initial insertion team to board the ship and reprogram the computer. All they had to do now was prepare the team. Since Maht’s ship didn’t have a holodeck, there would be no simulation of what they needed to do. They would have to do it the old fashion way, pseudo paper and pen, blue prints on a PADD. Sendak himself needed to imprint the memory chips with the new data. On arrival at their destination, all crew members, even Maht’s crew, were to double up when they were in range of the of the Losira computer system. Non target members would present themselves as obstacles to prevent Losira from making contact with specified target. His briefing was specific and to the point, covering only the items necessary for the capture of the Path Finder and the obstacles that they would face.

“Any questions?” Garcia asked.

There were no takers.

“Fine, lets get to work. Number One, I want to see the entire Path Finder crew assembled in shuttle bay two, four hours from now. Formals,” Garcia said, and then excused himself.

Garcia returned to the quarters provided to him by Maht, only a little less agitated. There was so much to do and much of it had to be kept secret, which he hated. As he entered, Rivan sat up. She had been lying on the bed, crying, and petting Clemmons. She wiped her tears. Garcia felt remorseful and went to her side. He hugged her to him and she embraced him, just as if nothing had happened.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you and hurt you,” Garcia said. “I was not expecting to see you and I over reacted.”

“I am sorry I have inconvenienced you,” Rivan said. “I know your work is important.”

“You’re not an inconvenience and my work is never so important that I should forget to be civil,” Garcia said. “I care very much about your safety and well being and I panicked. We’re going into a dangerous situation. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I came out here to learn,” Rivan said. “What better place for me to learn than on a starship? I can learn about humans and Klingons now. And I am safe because you are the Captain.”

“You’re not safe because I am the Captain,” Garcia said. “In fact, you could actually be in danger because I am the Captain. If the Klingons can’t hurt me, they will aim at people I love. They will see it as a test. If I can’t protect my own family, then I am not worthy of holding my position. I will see that you get back to Earth as soon as I can.”

“Tam, I have to stay with you,” Rivan said.

“No, you don’t,” Garcia said. “You’ll be okay on Earth. McCoy will be back soon and he’ll look after you.”

“No,” Rivan said. “You don’t understand. I have to stay with you. The message the Guardian sent McCoy told him this.”

“McCoy didn’t say that,” Garcia corrected her.

“He told me this before he left on his mission. He told me to stay with you. Maybe you should read the message,” she said, taking off her ring.

Garcia took Rivan’s ring over to the table where a PADD rested. He placed the ring on top of the PADD, just as McCoy had done when he inadvertently discovered the Gaurdian of Edo’s message. He watched as text filled the screen of his PADD. He started reading the message, but then decided he had to sit down and to absorb what it was truly saying. It was cryptic, and in verse, but it didn’t necessarily say Rivan was to be in Garcia’s charge. There were references to Iotia and the Preserver base which Garcia destroyed. And references to Gods, like Apollo, who met Kirk. Could it be that Rivan’s gods, the guardians of Edo, were somehow related? When he scrolled through the script to see the remaining bits of the message, he became visibly upset.

“What’s wrong? What does it say?” Rivan asked, coming to his side.

“It’s nothing” Garcia said.

“Nothing? I know you better than that,” Rivan said. “I may not be able to read English yet, but I can read you. Something is wrong.”

Garcia hugged her and kissed her forehead. “You will stay with me.”

“You won’t tell me what it says, or you can’t tell me what it says?” Rivan asked.

“Can you tell me precisely what McCoy told you?” Garcia asked.

“He just said to stay with you,” Rivan said, and then as an after thought, chuckled. “And keep you safe.”

“He said that, did he?” Garcia asked, wondering if McCoy’s message had been different from the one he had just read.

“Yeah,” Rivan said. “What did it say?”

“It was just bad poetry,” Garcia said. “I’ve written better.”

Garcia handed Rivan her ring back. “Keep this ring with you at all times. Your Guardian wants you to return home safely. If you ever feel like your life is in immediate peril, that ring has the power to transport you back home.”

“I know,” Rivan said. “But my instructions were very clear. I have to be facing imminent death. Other than that, I must return home by Starship. I thought maybe you would take me when I have finished learning what I was sent to learn.”

“It would be an honor to escort you home,” Garcia said, erasing the information from the PADD. He would never have to read it again, for it was committed to memory. He set the PADD back on the table. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” Rivan said.

“So am I,” Garcia said. “We’ll eat, and then I’ll teach you how to play the game Lokai-Bele.”

“Really? I love games,” Rivan said.

Garcia’s quarters provided potable water, which he used to make tea. While the tea brewed, he opened a number of ration packs and mixed them accordingly. He put the impromptu meal on the table and fetched the game board and chips from the chest that Kletsova and Trini had fetched up for him. The board consisted of a checker board grid, covered with green felt, with raised borders defining the playing field. There was a collection of chips on either side of the board with a flip lid to prevent them from falling about. The chips were black on one side and white on the other. He placed four chips in the center of the board, two white up and two black up, and then proceeded to instruct Rivan on to how to play the game. He also gave her a history of the game, a debate that placed its origins in ancient China, revived in the late twentieth century. It had several name changes, including Reversi and Othello, but about hundred years ago the game had been revived and named after the last two inhabitants of planet Cheron. The unique genetic trait of this now extinct speices was that they were black on one side of their face and white on the other. Because of this variablility in the gene accounting for color, some people were white on the right side, and the other was white on the left side, and this one simple divergent trait was sufficient to bring them all to ruin.

“They killed each other because of skin color?” Rivan asked. “Variation is good for the over all population? It means not all are suceptable to the same diseases.”

“If all societies were as smart as yours, perhaps there would be more worlds like yours, a model of Eden,” Garcia said.

“We’re hardly perfect, if that’s what you mean by Eden,” Rivan said. “I wouldn’t need to be out here learning from others if I believed for a moment that we were perfect just as we are. Hey! You get to flip all of those?!”

“Horizontal and diagonal. Don’t get discouraged that you can’t beat me,” Garcia said. “It will take you awhile to learn strategy. I will help you at first, but once you catch on, I will start withholding advice.”

“I think I understand the game,” Rivan said, pretend pouting. She took another bite of food and grimaced. “I prefer replicator food to this.”

“Yeah, me too,” Garcia said. “But it is better than the fresh foods the Klingons would offer.” Just to watch her reaction, he described the foods the Klingon Admiral had had on his table when they had shared a meal together earlier.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Garcia entered the shuttle bay where his crew was assembled and he didn't like what he saw. The Federation crew was huddled together, a squad of Nausicans was lined together, and the Klingon crew grouped together, but they were not all together. He turned to Kitara and turned his disappointment visibly towards his First Officer.

"Do you see what I see?" Garcia asked.

"Yes," Kitara said.

"I'm going to step out for a moment and give you a chance to correct it," Garcia said. He departed the shuttle bay. When he returned, there was a better attempt at a merging of the two crews. He nodded his approval to Kitara. "That's better."

Garcia stepped forward to address them. His crew. People that would live or die at his command. People that would die if he made a mistake. "We will not be thinking of ourselves as two crews. We are one in our intent and purpose. Our goals will be shared goals. Our differences will not be liabilities, but rather, they will be our strengths. We will recognize our differences and appreciate the diversity. Consequently, we will not have two laws, one for Klingons and one for non Klingons. For starters, there will be no promotions through assignments on my ship. If anyone has a problem with this, come forward now and confront me."

Two Klingons stepped forwards. Both were previously First Officer Candidates and they drew daggers as they approached Garcia. Kitara drew a dagger.

"Stand down, number one," Garcia said. "This is a fair challenge, which I invited. If there are any others who would like to join these two dead men, step forward now."

Three more stepped forwards, each drawing their daggers.

"Very well," Garcia said. "Let's finish this."

When it was said and done Garcia stood unscathed and there were five dead Klingons on the floor. He ignored the shock look on the faces of several of the non-Klingons, especially on the face of Trini. She was definitely not accustomed to this sort of brutality.

"Kitara, present these warriors to Sto-Vo-Kor," Garcia said.

Kitara proceeded with the ceremony, motioning for their eyes to be opened and the crew to cry the warrior's cry. The entire Klingon crew followed through with the rituals. When it was done, Garcia stepped forwards. Blood pooled around his feet.

"Since no one else came forward, I expect no more challenges to my authority, given to me by Admiral Sheaar," Garcia said. "Our mission is dangerous. There will not be crew replacements. For everyone that dies, their work load will be distributed accordingly and, I assure you, it won't always be fair. Non Klingon crew members, you will begin to learn the ways of your fellow Klingon crew members and be respectful of their beliefs. I expect the same in reverse. Are there any questions?"

"Sir! No Sir," came the response.

"We'll be arriving at our destination soon," Garcia said. "I expect you to familiarize yourself with the ship specs that were provided us. As soon as we board the ship, we'll be away on our first mission. It's a mission that may just save the Federation and the Klingon Empire from disaster."

Garcia turned to Kitara. "Have the dead disposed of properly, and then you and the senior officers meet me in my quarters for a briefing."

Garcia departed the shuttle bay and was immediately met by Admiral Sheaar.

"You didn't hesitate to kill the five," Admiral Sheaar said. "Good. That earned you some points with your Klingon crew."

"It was a waste," Garcia said, not to mention a loss of points with his non-Klingon crew, who are obviously in shock. The look on Trini's face still haunted him.

"It's not a waste if the others learn from the dead," Admiral Sheaar said. "You fought them unarmed and killed them with their own weapons. In Klingon, that is pure poetic justice."

"I don't think it was enough," Garcia said. "There is still uncertainty. I am surprised more didn't step forward."

"I agree," Admiral Sheaar said. "I think they held back because of me. I hand picked these men and they know I picked you. But I assure you, I will see your crew unified before I leave you to your mission."

"Really? And how do you propose to do that?" Garcia asked.

"As soon as you've taken the ship and your crew is beamed on, we will engage in a war game exercise," Admiral Sheaar said. "It will give them an opportunity to see Tamm Garcia the Great in action, and solidify your reputation as a great warrior. Good night, Captain."

With that, Admiral Sheaar turned and went down another corridor. Garcia shook his head and proceeded to his room. War games, indeed! Another waste of time and energy when there was work to be done. He put it aside and entered his quarters. Rivan was there, about to feed Clemmons, but trying to get Clemmons to do a trick before she rewarded him with his food. Clemmons rubbed up against her legs. Garcia came over pointed at Clemmons and the cat sat down. Then Garcia gave an open palm signal, and the cat stood up on its hind legs, touching one paw to Garcia's hand.

"How do you do that?" Rivan asked, setting the bowl down in front of Clemmons.

"You're being too nice. Don't talk to him, just point at him," Garcia said, going to wash his hands. "Use calm, assertive energy. Not affection. Affection calls for touch."

"I would just be happy if he didn't try to trip me everytime I go to prepare him a meal," Rivan said.

"Just keep practicing. Rivan, I need to ask you to go visit Tatiana and Trini for awhile," Garcia said. "I will call you when you can return."

"Okay," Rivan said. "You want me to take Clemmons?"

"No," Garcia said. "He can stay."

Rivan hugged Garcia before departing. A few minutes later, the senior officers reported. Garcia opened the floor for any questions or concerns.

"I want to know if you will be denying all Klingon customs, or just certain ones," Lt. Tuer said.

"Is there one in particular you're missing?" Garcia asked.

"Trophies and other spoils of war is a Klingon custom that I would like to preserve," Tuer said. "That is the right of a victor of any battle."

"We'll decide that on a case by case basis," Garcia said. "Fair enough?"

Tuer grunted.

Kitara hit Tuer in the face and knocked him to the ground. "You will answer him with a yes or no," Kitara said.

“That is sufficient,” Tuer said, rubbing his jaw. He stood up and retook his chair. “Provided the captain will be open to petitions and negotiations.”

“This is not a negotiation,” Kitara said, threatening to hit the Klingon again.

“I will consider requests,” Garcia said. “Run it through the chain of command. If it gets to me, my decision will be final. The end goal should be to avoid disrupting the ship’s community. I will not have two of my warriors fighting over trophies. I will also not tolerate sentient beings as trophies. All prisoners of war are to be treated humanely. Is that part clear?”

“It is,” Tuer agreed. He took his seat.

“Will we have fresh food on our ship?” Doctor Jurak asked.

“My understanding is that there is Federation Replicator system on board,” Garcia said.

“I read the specs, too,” Jurak said. “But Klingons and Nausicans require fresh foods. Live foods. The replicator can synthesize proteins and synthetic flesh, but it can not make it living. Live foods, properly maintained, is essential to the spiritual and physical health of Klingons.”

“I believe there is a galley on board,” Garcia said. “And a kennel to keep live foods. I personally think it’s a waste of space. The non Klingons on our ship are used to having larger quarters than what the engineers designed this ship to have and they won’t understand why the live stock gets better accommodations than they do. However, I understand your request and I will see to it that Maht supplies us accordingly. Further, I see this as a luxury. Let’s make sure I hear no more jokes from the Klingons about how the non Klingons are pampered with blankets and pillows on their beds.”

“There will be no more joking about our differences,” Kitara promised. “We are going to need a new chef.”

“What happened to the old chef?” Garcia asked.

“You killed him,” Tuer said.

Garcia grimaced and tried to turn the grimace into something that resembled a thoughtful reflex. He turned to Jurak. “How are your cooking skills?”

“I have never heard a complaint,” Jurak said.

“Great,” Garcia said. “When your duties as Doctor are not immediately needed, you will be the ship’s chef. I expect the meals to meet the nutritional and spiritual requirements of the Klingon crew, as well as the non Klingons. Some of us enjoy fresh foods, too. I, personally, would like fresh fruits and vegetables.”

“It will be done,” Jurak said.

“Find someone to cover for Jurak when he is otherwise occupied,” Garcia told Kitara.

“Done,” Kitara said.

“I have a problem with your request that Kletsova join our boarding party,” Tuer said, wary of getting hit again.

“Really?” Garcia asked. “Please, go on.”

“She is human. She is female. My job is to get you on that ship and protect you in the process. I prefer an all Klingon boarding party,” Tuer said.

“Tuer, you are going to find that there are few humans who can compete with the Klingon prowess,” Garcia said. “Tatiana is not a Klingon, but she knows her job, she

will act accordingly, and I will not excuse her from normal duty rotations simply because she does not meet your standards.”

“As you said, she is not Klingon,” Tuer said. “We’ll be going up against an enemy she can’t compete with. I see no reason to put her in a position to fail.”

“I agree with your philosophy and were we going up against fellow Klingons, I would suggest someone with more physical strength,” Garcia said. “We’re not facing an enemy that requires strength. We’re going up against an enemy that requires cunning. Tatiana can hold her own in this instance. Your concern is reasonable and I value your input.”

After a few other matters that required discussions, they concluded the meeting. Doctor Jurak asked to remain behind in order to speak with Garcia. Garcia welcomed him. When the others had gone, Garcia offered the Doctor some coffee.

“It’s a Klingon brew,” Garcia offered. “I usually have my raktajino with shaved ice, but hot from the pot is all I have to offer.”

“I don’t drink coffee with those who don’t respect me,” Jurak said.

Garcia brought two cups of coffee to the table and sat one down in front of the Doctor. “Good, then you will be happy to drink with me.”

“I was told you favored Doctor Misan,” Jurak said.

“I do,” Garcia said.

“Because I am a hunter,” Jurak said.

“Partly,” Garcia said. “I also have some concerns about your bedside manner.”

“You humans are too soft on your patients. Healing could be accelerated if you were to push them instead of pamper them,” Jurak said.

“Perhaps,” Garcia said. “You’re going on the philosophy that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

“Indeed. Sterile fields are not always in society’s best interest,” Jurak said.

“But it is in the patience best interest,” Garcia corrected.

“Sometimes,” Jurak said. “When a population sees an increase in allergies, it is most likely the result of over emphasis on antibacterial soaps. Children are meant to get dirty. It makes them stronger adults. Warriors need to be able to defeat their enemies, both small and large.”

“Philosophically, I see your point,” Garcia said, sipping his coffee. “It’s really good coffee.”

“So, it is just the hunting you have a problem with?” Jurak said.

“I understand hunting, philosophically,” Garcia said. “I also understand farming animals, philosophically. What I do not understand is the need to hunt in the face of so many viable alternatives, the replicator being just one of those. I could grow you a steak in a Petri dish with a few stem cells and grass cuttings and you couldn’t tell the difference from that and a heart fresh from a live targh.”

“You are too far removed from your food,” Jurak said. “Humans have lost the spiritual connection with the bio diversity that sustains them. They think food comes from a vending machine or a replicator, not from the Earth, not without a price.”

“No, we have learned to be more appreciative of life and don’t kill needlessly,” Garcia said.

“A lion must have meat, not grain,” Jurak said.

"I agree, and in the zoo, they get synthesized meat and live just as well, if not better, than the lions in the wild," Garcia offered.

"You would not fault a wild lion for killing to survive, why would you fault me for the same practice?" Jurak said.

"Because you're not a wild lion. You're a sentient being," Garcia said. "See that cat sleeping on the bed. I like that cat. I would prefer you not kill it."

"I would not kill your pet," Jurak protested.

"Well, I got news for you, if I encounter one of these wild targs you're wanting to keep for fresh food, I will have a pet targh," Garcia said. "That's how I feel about animals. I could not kill something to eat when I have an alternative. And on principle, I can not eat meat when I didn't kill it, because I feel it is wrong to allow someone else to take a life that I was unwilling to take, just for me to accommodate a particular taste."

"I respect that last part," Jurak said. "You should not eat what you are not willing to kill. And I do not kill for sport. I eat what I kill, no part goes to waste."

"And I respect that," Garcia said. "Just don't ask me to participate or like it."

"How did you become such a good doctor when you are so disinclined to kill anything?" Jurak asked. "It is necessary to get your hands bloody, to feel the flesh, to know how much pressure you must apply, to know how to cut, and make mistakes."

"I learned mostly on simulations," Garcia said.

"Holodeck! Simulations!" Jurak spit. "It is not the same as the real thing."

"I have had my hands in the real thing and I believe I have more respect for the flesh knowing that it is real, versus simulated," Garcia said.

"I see that you and I will never agree on these things," Jurak said.

"And we don't have to," Garcia said. "You keep my crew alive, keep them healthy, treat them without causing them additional pains, and you and I will have a great working relationship."

"I take pride in keeping my patients alive and healthy," Jurak said. He picked up the coffee and drank it. He looked genuinely surprised. "That is good."

Garcia raised his coffee mug, "cheers" gesture.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Admiral Sheaar, Captain Garcia, and Captain Maht were on the Bridge when they dropped out of warp. Two other Klingon vessels had joined them enroute to their destination. They proceeded on impulse into a nebula cloud, where they had hidden their secret base, a hollowed out asteroid which had been moved to this location.

"Shields off line," the helm announced. It wasn't unexpected. Nebula's were known to interfere with the normal operation of shield technology.

"Are we in range of the base telemetry?" Admiral Sheaar asked.

"Affirmative," the science officer said. "But we're receiving no telemetry."

An intruder alert klaxon began to blare.

"Where is it?" Captain Maht demanded.

"Captain, I've lost all navigational information," the helm officer announced.

"All stop," Captain Maht said.

"The other starships are reporting similar conditions," the science officer said.

"It sabotaged three ships simultaneously?" Sheaar asked. "How many agents can this computer project?"

"I don't know," Garcia said. "I'm certain Pressman modified it from the original computer Kirk discovered a hundred years ago. If I remember correctly, three was the known upper limit of that time."

"We can't go in blind," Maht said. "Turn us about."

"Wait a minute," Garcia said. "Why don't we use Dryac."

"I will not relinquish my Bridge to that creature!" Maht said.

"Then let her use auxiliary control," Garcia said. "She knows where we are and can take us to the coordinates you provide her."

"Do it," Admiral Sheaar said.

"Fine," Captain Maht said. "Number one, prepare auxiliary control for the Medusan."

Garcia tapped his communicator. "Mr. Smith, you and Dryac are needed in auxiliary control. Someone will be along shortly to guide you. We need Dryac as a navigator."

"I understand," Smith said.

"Make it quick. Lives are at stake," Garcia said.

"How will you get her to auxiliary control?" Maht asked.

"She has a carrier," Garcia said.

Intruder alert Klaxons began blaring again. This time they saw her materialize, for she beamed onto the Bridge. At first, it was just a dot. The dot stretched into a line, then stretched into a plane the shape and size of a silhouette of a human female. The silhouette became a two dimensional color representation of a human female that ballooned out into a full fledged female. "Lt. Niar, I am for you," she said, and reached out to touch the helm operator.

Niar failed to obey his prior instructions, reached out to block her touch, thinking he would break her arm and pound her in the face, and immediately cried out in pain. He dropped dead before Garcia could get the Losira agent away from him. She twisted in Garcia's arms, turning sideways, deflating back into a two dimensional image, shrunk to a line, then a dot, and then was gone.

“He’s dead,” Maht said. “Everyone double up and follow the established procedure!”

“She’s on a seven minute cycle,” Garcia said, noting the space between the first intruder alert klaxon and the second.

“Captain Garcia,” came the most pleasant sounding female voice he had ever heard. “This is Dryac. I’m in auxiliary control, awaiting your instructions.”

“You have the base coordinates, take us in,” Garcia said. “The sooner you get us there, the better. Maht, have the other two ships follow our beacon.”

Maht scowled at Garcia. “I know my job, human.” He then glanced at the Science officer and it was done. “It’s time to get you to the shuttle bay,” Maht said to Garcia, shoving him towards the door.

Garcia and Maht left the Bridge. They were nearly to the shuttle bay when the intruder alert klaxon began to blare again. She appeared in the corridor in front of Garcia and Maht. They both appropriately hesitated.

“I am for you,” she said, extending her hand. “Captain Maht.”

Captain Maht stepped back and Captain Garcia stepped forwards, blocking her from her target.

“Please!” she cried to Maht, trying to reach past Garcia, but she was held firmly in place. “I must touch you.”

After a moment of struggling, she gave up and disappeared. Garcia and Maht proceeded to the shuttle bay. As they entered, Kitara handed Garcia his life belt. Tuer handed one to Maht, who had volunteered to lead the expedition. Tuer had not complained about the change.

“Prepare to activate life belts,” Garcia instructed. “We’ll be depressurizing shuttle bay in two minutes. Visors on. All com. badges should be on for the duration of the mission.”

The intruder alert klaxon went off again.

“It hasn’t been seven minutes,” Maht complained.

She appeared before them.

“Who have you come for this time?” Garcia asked.

She raised her hand, turning as if orientating, but appropriately adding misdirection, so that she might lunge towards a person at the last moment. “I am for you, Kitara.”

Garcia immediately jumped in front of Kitara. As he went to apply the same hold he had used on her previously in the corridor, she fought back and held her own in a combat style similar to Garcia’s. Maht stepped into the battle and stabbed her with his dagger. She fell back into Garcia’s arms, looked up at him and then faded away.

“Ha! She can be killed,” Maht said.

“She’ll be back,” Garcia said, and activated his life belt. “Life belts on?”

After all life belts were activated, Maht ordered the shuttle bay to be depressurized. Consequently, no one heard the alert klaxon go off because the air had been evacuated.

“Look out,” Kletsova said, but it was too late. The Losira agent stepped up and touched Garcia, pushing her hand hard against his chest.

The life belt’s shield saved him from physical contact. Losira seemed just as surprised as Garcia was. Angry, Garcia punched her in the face. She staggered back just

as Kitara and Kletsova pulled her away from him. A fight ensued, which Kitara won. Losira disappeared.

“Captain Maht, we’re in position,” Admiral Sheaar announced.

“Open shuttle bay doors,” Maht said. “Follow me.”

They were all electronically tethered, so as not to get lost in the nebula cloud. The visors also provided them information, allowing them to see each other in the cloud. Without the visors, they wouldn’t be able to see their hands in front of their faces. Maht was handed a hand-held thruster pack before he stepped out into space and powered away from the ship. Everyone in line received the same and followed Maht out. Garcia was in the center of the group, as they meant to protect him at all cost.

Outside in space, Garcia watched his group close in on the asteroid. The asteroid was practically invisible until they were on top of it. They clumsily made their way, floating above the surface until they came up upon the pressure vent. They heard one of the Klingons cry out and then was suddenly silenced.

“What happened?!” Garcia demanded.

“His belt was deactivated,” Tuer said.

“Stand clear,” Maht said. “I’ve set the explosives.”

No sooner than Maht announced it, the explosives went off, and the vent tore free. As the air inside evacuated the hollowed out asteroid, the nebula gasses were blown away, diffused to where they could see the Losira agent getting ready to strike. She inserted a sword into a victim, which penetrated his shield. He cried out in pain and died. The Losira agent deactivated his belt and touched the Klingon, ensuring he was dead.

“She’s learning,” Kitara said.

“Let’s move,” Maht said, leading the way into the vent tunnel, diving head first. He had to abandon the hand held thruster

The tunnel was dark, smooth walls as if the whole thing was tunnel was carved with a laser. The end of the tunnel opened up into a large cavity, as if the asteroid were nothing more than a giant geode. They emerged standing on the inside of the asteroid, with full normal gravity, thanks to the gravity grid lining most of the inner surface. Where there was no grid, large clusters of crystals emerged in clumps. It was like standing in a cavern, looking up at a ship tethered by girders to keep it in place as the asteroid orbited the center of mass of the nebula. Three lines were shot at the Path Finder and they proceeded to rappel up to the ship. The further they got from the floor, the less gravity they felt so that by the time they were at the Path Finder, they were weightless again.

“The ship looks like something from that old Flash Gordon TV series,” Kletsova remarked.

“No it doesn’t,” Garcia argued.

“Let’s stay focused,” Maht yelled.

Tuer had the emergency escape hatch opened by the time everyone was in place. They entered, closed the outer hatch, pressurized the room, and then opened the inner hatch.

“This way,” Tuer said. And proceeded down the darkened corridor.

“Lights,” Garcia said, hoping the computer would respond.

Nothing happened.

“Computer, emergency power to the lights,” Garcia said.

Emergency lighting came up. Even with the security system online to defend against intruders, it couldn't deny organics lights in an emergency.

"Intruders must be eliminated," Losira said, coming around the corner. She came with a friend, an exact duplicate of herself. Two more came from either side of the corridor.

Tuer and Maht engaged the two directly in front of them, while the remaining guards took on the Losira agents to Garcia's right and left. There were six Losira agents all together and they proved to be handful. Garcia was about to enter the fray when Kitara took him by the arm.

"This way," Kitara said, pulling Garcia. She took him around the fight and down the corridor. "Kletsova, Omlar, with us."

They went a round about way but arrived at the computer station they needed to access. Holographic hands emerged from the floor and tripped Kletsova, and then pinned her to the floor. One of the multiple sets of hands that grabbed Kletsova also muffled her to prevent her from warning the others. Kitara was grabbed from behind and pulled tight to the wall, holographic hands holding her in place.

"Go, hurry," Kitara said.

Garcia placed an electronic assist against the wall and powered the door opened. He and Omlar entered and went straight away to the panel that needed to be removed.

Losira appeared. She reached out and pulled Omlar away from the panel, literally tossing him across the room. She turned to Garcia. "Please, I must touch you."

"You're very polite about it," Garcia said, putting a chair between them.

"I am for you, Tammias Garcia," she insisted.

"If you only knew how often I have heard that one," Garcia said, nodding to Omlar to go and insert the chip set.

Omlar staggered back to the access port, badly injured. Losira ignored him, completely focused on Garcia. She was so close to her goal she almost seemed to be quivering with excitement and anticipation.

"Why do you resist?" Losira asked.

"You're capable of learning," Garcia said. "You must realize that I am an authorized user of this Starship. Stand down."

"I do not recognize your voice print," she said. "Ouch!"

Losira turned suddenly on Omlar and kicked him away from the access panel. She didn't stop there. She continued to attack him, giving Garcia time to reach the access panel and complete the installation that Omlar had failed to finish, tossing the chips down that he didn't need in favor of the ones he did.

"Ouch!" Losira said, turning back to Garcia.

Losira rushed at Garcia. He pushed in the last chip and stood up.

"Stand down, authorization code: up, down, and charmed," Garcia said.

"Captain Tammias Garcia, voice recognition confirmed," Losira said, and extended a hand. "Please, I must touch you."

"Don't," Omlar wheezed, in a bad way but still conscious. "She is programmed to kill you."

Garcia reached out and took Losira's hand. He felt a tingling that ran up his arm like tiny bolts of electricity, but he didn't cry out, nor did he try to let go. She pulled him closer to him, her eyes locking onto his.

“Biometric and retina scan confirmed,” Losira said. She then embraced Garcia and kissed him, hard on the mouth.

All through the ship, lights and computer systems began to power up. Kletsova and Kitara were released and they immediately entered to check on Garcia and Omlar. They were both surprised to see Garcia kissing the hologram, Losira.

“Everywhere he goes,” Kletsova said, crossing her arms.

Kitara raised an eyebrow.

Losira separated from Garcia and went to a Parade Rest posture.

“Captain Garcia,” Losira said. “Welcome aboard. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Kletsova shook her head.

“Yes, deactivate the asteroid station’s transporter block,” Garcia said. “Captain Garcia to Admiral Sheaar. Mission accomplished. You may begin transporting my crew over. Start with Doctor Jurak, I have a patient for him.”

Captain Maht and Tuer arrived.

“We were successful?” Maht asked.

“Didn’t you know? Garcia always gets the girl,” Kletsova said. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll start that sweep for human remains.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Losira said. “All traces of enemy organics have been removed. The ship is sterile.”

Doctor Jurak entered and assessed Omlar condition. “Get him to sickbay,” Jurak said, turning to take bio readings of the remaining boarding party. He stopped with Garcia. “I show cellular damage in your hand and lips. Come, I’ll repair it.”

“Just give me your tissue regenerator,” Garcia said. “Number One, prepare for a battle. I want us on full alert starting now, and I expect everyone to be battle ready before the last of the crew arrive.”

“I don’t understand?” Kitara said. “What’s the nature of the threat?”

“It’s nothing. Sheaar wants to play war games to help our crew come together as a team,” Garcia said.

Kitara stepped closer to Garcia. “You understand that Klingon war games are for real? Not simulated?”

Garcia grimaced. “Red alert, battle stations,” Garcia said. “Let’s move people.”

“You want me to sabotage the enemy ships?” Losira asked, following Garcia and Kitara as they made their way to the Bridge.

“No more killing for you,” Garcia said. “Until I update your situational ethics.”

“By your command,” Losira said, as simple as that.

They entered a turbo lift. “Why didn’t you tell me?” Kitara demanded when the doors were closed and they were out of ear shot of anyone but Losira. To her, the computer was just a thing, and didn’t warrant her attention. Garcia thought it was interesting just how much energy Kitara was using to ignore Losira, suggesting she was actually giving it as much energy as she might if she were paying full attention to it. Another human being would have shivered from the cold emanating from the First Officer, but Losira seemed indifferent to the obvious signs of contempt.

“Because, I was stupid,” Garcia said.

“We’re not ready,” Kitara said. “Three ships against one?!”

“We’re faster,” Garcia said. “We can out run them.”

“You will not run from this battle,” Kitara said.

They stepped out of the turbo lift and onto the Bridge.

Undine met them. “All ship’s personnel are on board and at their assigned posts,” Undine said. “What’s the emergency?”

“War games,” Kitara said.

“Klingon war games?” Undine asked.

Garcia nodded, pulling a stick of gum from a hidden pocket in his sleeve. He put the gum in his mouth and the foil in his pocket.

“Captain Garcia,” Losira interrupted.

“Can’t you shut her off?” Kitara asked.

“I’m not just the ship,” Losira said. “I am a member of the crew.”

“You’re a computer,” Kirara said.

“She’s the most sophisticated artificial intelligence ever created,” Garcia corrected.

“I prefer alternative intelligence,” Losira said.

“What did you want to ask?” Garcia asked.

“The space station’s impulse drives have been activated remotely,” Losira said.

“The station will arrive at the nebula center in forty minutes, however, pressure, heat, and radiation will kill off all organics in fifteen minutes, and I will cease to exist in twenty.”

“Can you over ride the station’s helm?” Kitara asked.

“I thought you didn’t want my input,” Losira said.

“Can you?” Garcia asked, motioning for Kitara to refrain from drawing her knife and killing the computer interface.

“Negative,” Losira said.

“Prepare to leave the station,” Garcia said. “Retract umbilicals.”

“You can’t just fly out of here,” Kitara said. “They’re waiting to blast us!”

“I know,” Garcia said. “McKnight, prepare to go to warp.”

“You’re going to fly us out of here on warp?” Undine asked. “Are you insane?”

“I can’t navigate through the tunnel at warp,” McKnight said. “I’m good, but I’m not that good.”

“I can,” Losira said.

“The exit is facing the center of the nebula. If you go out at warp, we’ll be dead as soon as you light the engines,” Kitara said.

“We’re dead already if we don’t act. Trust me, I have an idea,” Garcia said.

“Raise shields and then fire a torpedo from the aft, starboard launcher.

Kitara looked at him as if he were crazy.

“Now! Do it or we’re all dead.”

“Firing,” Kitara said, mumbling, “You’re going to bring the whole asteroid collapsing in on us.”

The torpedo exploded against the inside of the cavern. The hollowed out space of the asteroid didn’t fill up with debris as Kitara had imagined, but a cloud of dust and rocks and shards of supersized crystals showered down over the ship. The station started spinning around the ship and the dust and rocks from the blast fell away. Only McKnight’s hands on the helm kept the ship orientated towards the door and at the center of the hollow space.

“The station’s left impulse engine is out,” Losira said. “The station is rotating.”

"I see that," McKnight said.

"Losira, I need you to pilot the ship out of the station, proceed at warp one at my mark," Garcia said. "Kitara, arm eight photon torpedoes and launch them, all angles of dispersion, and at space normal speed. Now."

Kitara did as ordered. The torpedoes left the ship and floated away at a slow drift. With the station spinning out of control, the torpedoes drifted aft and counter clockwise in relationship to the station and the Path Finder. Kitara began a mental count down of when the torpedoes would explode, provided they didn't hit something first. Garcia gave the word to Losira. The Path Finder launched, shooting from the exit at warp one. Simultaneously with their departure, the torpedoes exploded, and so did the asteroid space station. The Klingon ship waiting to blast Garcia as the Path Finder left the station was too close to the asteroid when it was destroyed. It spiraled out of control, ran into the debris, and disintegrated.

"That was fun," Losira said.

"McKnight, take the helm. Heading two one four, point three one six," Garcia said. "Take us to warp six."

"Warp six, Aye," McKnight echoed. "Warp two. Warp four. Warp six achieved."

"We're being followed," Kitara said.

"How can that be?" Undine asked. "They're navigational systems were damaged."

"We're being tracked," Garcia said. "Locate the signal."

"There are no transmissions leaving the ship," Undine said.

"A screamer," Garcia and Kitara said simultaneously.

"A what?" Undine asked.

"Somewhere on the ship is a rivet that emits a noise when in the influence of a warp field," Garcia said. He turned to his first officer. "Can you locate it?"

"Trying," Kitara said.

"It must be masked to our sensors by normal ship frequencies," Garcia said. "Try adjusting the gain."

"Got it," Kitara said. "Number four engine nacelle."

"We need a place to hide," Garcia said. "An asteroid field?"

"Two light years ahead," McKnight said. "The Omadrán Field."

"Take us there, warp eight, and then kill the warp engines as soon as we can," "Captain to Engineering, we have a screamer attached to the fourth engine nacelle. As soon as we drop out of warp, I want a team to go out, locate the rivet or bolt, and get rid of it."

"On it," Gomez answered.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Path Finder came out of warp outside an asteroid field and powered full impulse into the heart of the chaos. It wasn't actually chaos. Most of the orbits were stable, locked in by the various gravity wells in the system. Every now and then a large comet would pass through and stir things up, but it was still fairly stable from the human perspective. Garcia ordered all nonessential systems to be powered down.

"Would you like me to engage the cloaking device," Losira asked.

Undine and McKnight looked to Garcia. "We have a cloaking device?" Undine asked.

"It's a Klingon ship," Garcia said. "Why wouldn't we?"

"We're Star Fleet and having cloaking technology in our possession is a violation of the Federation Romulan Treaty," Undine said.

"It is not a violation if it's a Klingon vessel," Kitara said.

"This ship is equipped with two types of cloaking systems," Losira said. "The exterior surface is coated with a material that can absorb and emit light on demand, so that when activated the system makes the ship virtually invisible in the electromagnetic spectrum. No matter which way you look at the ship from the outside, you are in affect seeing what's directly behind the ship from your vantage point, analogous to how water becomes translucent when it bubbles over a rock in a stream. Unfortunately, this system does not cloak our mass and it is possible that we could be detected by our gravitational influence on other objects. The secondary cloaking system is a traditional Klingon cloaking device, which will hide the ship and mass, but requires much more power to operate. They are, however, tried and tested means for detecting this technology, if you wish to spend the time and energy to do so."

"I say use the traditional cloaking system," Kitara said. "Our presence will have an affect on the objects nearest us. Maht will be looking for anomalies such as unexplained shift in object trajectories."

"Captain, I must protest," Undine said. "As much as I would prefer to avoid being a target, there is an underlying principle here that must not be ignored and I would be remiss in my duties to allow this technology to be utilized by Star Fleet Officers without speaking out."

"I could eliminate that problem," Tuer offered. His hand hovering near his dagger.

"At ease," Garcia said.

"There's another option," Losira said. "This ship is equipped with holographic technology designed to camouflage the ship. I can make the Path Finder look like an asteroid or another starship, if you like. I have several starship skins available in my memory banks."

"Whether it's light absorbing paint, Klingon Cloaking devices, or holographic technology, a cloaked ship is a cloaked ship and a violation of the treaty," Undine said.

"I appreciate your candor and your objection is noted and will be logged accordingly," Garcia said. "Losira, make us look like an asteroid. Kitara, how long will Sheaar allow this war game to continue?"

"Until all his ships take damage, we're destroyed, or we surrender," Kitara said. "All new Klingon starships engage in these types of games. It helps to reveal design flaws, works out bugs, and test the mettle of the new crew."

“Surrender? Why didn’t you say so?” Garcia asked. “Hail Admiral Sheaar.”

“No sir,” Kitara snapped. “You know how important our mission is. I will not allow you to show cowardice and ruin any chance this crew has of working together to accomplish the goals laid out for us.”

“I’ve killed enough people today,” Garcia said. “I don’t want any more deaths.”

“We are Klingons. Death is a part of life,” Kitara stood firm. “You knew that when you accepted this position. You agreed to play Klingon and I will see you follow through with that commitment or die trying.”

“Two Klingon ships have come out of warp,” Tuer announced. He seemed ready to pounce the moment Kitara gave the word. “They’re scanning for us.”

“Admiral Sheaar knows our ship’s abilities,” Kitara said. “And he knows we’re here. He will eventually find us. I propose a straight forward attack. Take out his warp nacelles and then target the weapon systems on the closest ship, keeping that ship between us and the other.”

“They won’t find us,” Losira assured Kitara. “I’m just a little black rain cloud, hovering over the honey tree.”

“What?!” Kitara asked, completely lost by Losira’s literary reference.

“Both ships are firing phasers,” Tuer announced. “They are targeting asteroids.”

“It’s random,” McKnight said. Garcia noted the signs of anxiety on her face. “It could take them years to find us.”

Kitara analyzed the firing pattern. “It’s not random,” Kitara said. “They are firing at asteroids that resemble the Path Finder’s mass and density. Given the firing pattern, I suspect we have approximately seventy two minutes until Sheaar’s vessel targets us.”

“I will have a clean shot in twenty minutes, if he continues on his present course,” Tuer said.

“Hold your fire,” Garcia said. “Undine, I want to know as soon as the screamer is found and removed. Kitara, Losira, I want to speak with both of you in my Ready Room.”

From the Bridge, there was single, open lift that rose to Garcia’s Ready Room. As soon as the lift came to a halt, it made a complete seal so no one below could hear him. Garcia turned to Kitara.

“It is because our mission is so important that I don’t want this vessel needlessly damaged, or any of the crew killed,” Garcia said. “This war game is a waste of time and resources.”

“You surrender and Captain Maht can have you executed,” Kitara said.

“Fine, I won’t surrender. I’ll just complement them and give them the win,” Garcia said.

“That would be surrendering,” Kitara said. “And Klingons don’t take prisoners. I would be forced to kill you for your cowardice. I would be subject to penalties if I didn’t try to kill you. You agreed to this game by not protesting to Sheaar when he first challenged you. The Klingon crew sees this exercise as a rite of passage, something all new crews and ships face. Every moment you delay in that endeavor causes doubt to rise in the minds of your Klingon crew.”

“It’s a wonder Klingon have any starships or warriors at all when you consider all the rites of passages you must endure,” Garcia said.

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” Kitara said. “And war games are part of the few exceptions that allow Klingons to engage their opponents and show mercy. We don’t have to kill them, we just have to win the battle. There will be no dishonor for them to lose, because they expect newer and better to triumph. It will only be dishonorable for us to lose.”

“What if I asked Sheaar to surrender,” Garcia asked.

“He will not surrender,” Kitara said. “And hailing him will reveal our location.”

“Maybe not,” Garcia said. “Losira, send a Losira agent to the Bridge of the SaLing and deliver a message to them. Say, Captain Garcia sends his complements and request that you surrender or face imminent destruction.”

“That would infuriate Captain Maht to no end,” Kitara said. “But Admiral Sheaar will not surrender. Even knowing how important our mission is, he would have us destroyed rather than have us wimp out, as you Earthlings call it.”

“I have to try the message,” Garcia said. “I can not in good conscience engage them in battle without giving them the option to stand down.”

“I would be happy to kill them for you,” Losira said.

“No!” Garcia and Kitara both said. Kitara added, “Klingons would never allow a machine to do their killing for them. You are a machine, created by us to serve us, and you should never be allowed to kill. Admiral Pressman is a coward for allowing such a machine to exist in the first place.”

“Losira, send the message to Admiral Sheaar, and report back to me his response,” Garcia said.

“Stand by,” Losira said. She looked up and to the right. “Transmitting Losira agent now. Ha, they are afraid of me, waiting for me to tell them who I have come for. Delivering message. Admiral Sheaar is laughing. Captain Maht is cursing you. Admiral Sheaar is speaking. He says, he applauds your escape from the station. He would have never guessed someone would go to warp in such a confined space, risking certain destruction. He politely declines your invitation to surrender and asks that you come out and play.”

Kitara looked skeptical about the “politely declining” description.

Losira suddenly looked very crossed. “That was unnecessary,” Losira said.

“What ever happened to don’t kill the messenger?”

Garcia and Kitara correctly guessed the Losira agent had been stabbed, probably by Maht himself.

“Lt. Undine to Captain Garcia,” came Undine’s voice over Garcia com badge.

“Go,” Garcia said.

“The screamer has been removed and the hole patched per specified maintenance procedure,” Undine said.

“Very well,” Garcia said. “We’ll be right down.”

Garcia, Kitara and Losira took the lift back down to the Bridge. Garcia took his command chair, center stage. In addition to the arm rest controls on his chairs, there were pedestals to his left and right, cut to define the circle that was the Captain’s space, which displayed information and allowed additional input. Losira stood to his left, ready to supply him with auditory information or do his bidding, as she was just as much a computer interface as a computer console. He pressed the button on his chair that allowed him to speak to his crew over the intercom.

“This is your Captain speaking,” Garcia said. “All hands, prepare for battle. This is not a drill.”

Tuer smiled at Garcia.

“Prepare to raise shields,” Garcia said. “Arm photon torpedoes and stand by. Tuer, target the SaLing’s engine nacelles.”

“Aye,” Tuer said.

“All stations show ready, Captain,” Undine said. She did not look happy.

“McKnight, I want a thirty second starboard engine burn at point seven impulse, heading zero one zero, mark, four four three,” Garcia said, and watched her as she programmed the parameters. She looked over shoulder to see if he were ready to execute the maneuver. He raised a finger and then pointed. “Now.”

Tuer looked at Garcia questioning. Kitara only smiled, knowing that there was a fifty fifty chance of success.

Captain Maht’s crew were so busy visually scanning the asteroid field for potential targets, they didn’t notice one stray asteroid tumbling into a new direction. They only took notice when the photon torpedo emerged from the asteroid and by then it was too late.

“Brace for impact,” Maht yelled.

The second Klingon ship, a K’Tinga class, rallied to Maht’s defense as Maht’s Vorcha class ship took a direct hit to its port nacelle. The Path Finder raised its shields, dropping the asteroid holographic skin, but activating its primary cloaking device, which was allowing the surface of the ship to pass light. Unlike with the secondary cloaking device, they could continue firing weapons with the primary cloak engaged. Torpedoes left a visible trail from ship to target, lowering the effectiveness of their cloak, but it was better than nothing. The other thing that gave away their position was the anti-photon torpedo system. It was an automated system, firing missiles designed to intercept and early detonate torpedoes. It was automated because no human could detect and respond to a launched torpedo fast enough to make the necessary kill, with the greater the distance between the initial launching of the torpedo the greater chance of successfully eliminating the torpedo. Hitting the torpedo with an anti torpedo was most effective if the torpedo was struck on the opposite side of the Path Finder’s shields, which the antitorpedoes slipped through as easily as through a magnetic field. The missiles departed the Path Finder and intersected the torpedoes so quickly that it appeared that the Path Finder was destroying them with lasers. Unfortunately, the two ships firing at the Path Finder were so close that when anti torpedoes hit their targets, they detonated almost on top of the shields. Both the SaLing and the second ship were launching everything they had. And so was the Path Finder.

The Path Finder’s shields fluoresced from radiation from the dozens of exploding torpedoes and from several direct phaser blasts, making the Path Finder’s easier and easier to target. The Path Finder returned fired, firing phasers and photon torpedoes.

“The excess radiation is overwhelming the anti-photon torpedo detection system,” Losira said.

“A third ship de-cloaking starboard,” Kitara announced.

“It’s firing photon torpedoes!” Tuer added.

“Evasive action,” Garcia ordered.

At point blank range, the first torpedo of the new ship hit the shields. That section of the shields collapsed allowing the second, third and fourth torpedoes to proceed through the hole. All of this happened faster than Kitara could announce the obvious, "Port side shields are down."

"Evasive action," Losira agreed.

A number of things happened at once. Garcia braced for impact and suddenly discovered that the grips in the arms of his chair were hidden interfaces to the Kelvan computer on board the Path Finder. The world slowed intimately for him, allowing him to see details and options he had not previously had access to. His order for evasive action had been directed to the helm, but Losira had interpreted it as her instructions to save the ship. She activated a feature no one on board knew was possible. She caused the ship to phase out of alignment with matter in normal space time. It took two point three seconds for the torpedoes fired by the third ship to pass through the Path Finder, one of which passed directly through the Bridge, lighting it up with an evil red glow as it passed through. One of the torpedoes that passed through exploded against an asteroid, the other two went off into space. At three point six seconds they phased back into normal space and at that precise moment, every Klingon on the ship fell unconscious.

"McKnight, fire aft and starboard torpedoes," Garcia ordered.

It took McKnight two seconds to open an auxiliary window to allow her to fire from her station, but she fired them. The torpedoes launched and would have impacted against the shields of the two ships they had been fired at, except Garcia used the Kelvan transporter and beamed them past the shields, rematerializing them directly inside of the ships they had been targeted at. The torpedoes tore through the decks and exploded. The K'tinga class aft of the Path Finder disintegrated as its warp core was directly impacted. The other ship took longer to die, its neck completely severed in two, sending the bridge tumbling and the drive section careening out of control, crashing it into an asteroid. Maht's ship had managed to turn about and was in the process of acquiring its target. The Path Finder was still invisible, but its shields were brilliant, thanks to its shields fluorescing as they absorbed energy from the destruction of the two Klingon vessels. Using the Kelvan transporters, Garcia beamed Admiral Shear and Captain Maht to holding cells in his Brig and then turned the remaining crew aboard the SaLing into polyhedra. Each polyhedron contained the essence of the Klingon warriors, minus the water. Like dice thrown in a game of chance, the polyhedra tumbled where they fell.

Confident the battle was over, Garcia fought to relinquish the Kelvan interface. It was the same struggle he had had the previous times he had engaged a Kelvan computer. The reluctance came from not wanting to give up the power and the options it provided him, as well as overwhelming neural stimulation. The difficulty of disengaging from the Kelvan computer was similar in difficulty to stopping a romantic encounter after foreplay had taken the participants past the point of no return. As difficult as it was, Garcia managed to release the grips. His perception of the flow of time return to normal and the world seemed less colorful, less alive. The stimulus provided by his normal senses was inadequate to sustain his interest in the real world. He had to force himself to stand up and walk away from his chair, still struggling with his urge to re-engage the Kelvan device. He took two steps away from his chair.

"Lt. Undine," Garcia said, his hands trembling. "Have Doctor Misan treat Doctor Jurak and Kitara before treating any of the other Klingons. You'll find Admiral Shear

and Captain Maht in the Brig. I want them to stay there until I say otherwise, post guards. You're in charge until Kitara wakes up."

And then Garcia collapsed. Undine caught him and lowered him to the floor. Garcia woke in sickbay.

"Good," Doctor Jurak said, not helping him up, but simply monitoring Garcia's process. "I know why the Klingons were rendered unconscious, but I don't have a clue about what happened to you. Do you have a condition not recorded in your medical files?"

"I'll explain what happened to me later," Garcia said, not wanting to reveal his secret. "Is everyone one alright?"

"Four Klingons died due to the neural imbalance caused by the phase shift," Jurak said. "None of the humans were affected. Dryac is still unconscious, but should pull through. Mr. Smith is administering her treatment, since none of us can, but we are monitoring her remotely. Doctor Misan is experiencing headaches, but they should pass."

"And all of this is a consequence of the phase shift?" Garcia said.

"Yes," Jurak said. "Who's idea was it to use it?"

"We'll discuss that in a moment," Garcia said, and activated his com. badge.

"Senior Officers report to the conference room, ASAP."

"Let's go, Doctor. Misan can handle things from here," Garcia said.



The senior Officers were in the conference room before Garcia and Doctor Jurak arrived. As soon as Garcia entered, a number of protest and questions began to fly. Garcia silenced them with a single motion and sat down. He was sociologically intrigued with the way his senior officers had chosen their seating arrangement around the table, leaving him at the head of the table, the far end of the room, but he had no time for this particular tangent. He rubbed his forehead, feeling what he could only describe as side effects from a night of heavy drinking, and noted his senior officers were waiting for him to speak. Garcia turned his attention to Losira.

"Losira," Garcia said. "Explain what happened after I gave orders for evasive actions."

"The anti photon torpedoe system was declining in efficiency due to the increase in proximal radiation, port side shields took a direct hit from a photon torpedoe, and the shields collapsed. To avoid being damaged, I caused a phase shift to occur, allowing the torpedoes to pass safely through us," Losira said. She didn't seem to mind that she was the only one still standing. There was no seat for her. "It would have occurred even without your orders to take evasive action. It's a self preservation mechanism hard wired into my being. I, the ship, must survive."

"Can you resist this impulse?" Garcia asked.

"I must survive," Losira repeated.

"Can you resist the impulse to phase shift?" Garcia asked. "And rely on the decisions and skills of the crew to preserve you?"

"It will be difficult, but I can endeavor to do so," Losira said.

"You're dismissed," Garcia told her. "And no eaves dropping."

Losira nodded and disappeared.

"I want her dismantled!" Tuer said.

Omlar and Undine agreed.

"We're not going to do that," Garcia said.

"Captain," Sendak said. "I have to agree with them. Losira is a child. She has access to a vast bank of knowledge, but no wisdom. That wisdom will come shortly, and it will grow exponentially. She could be a threat to the crew."

"We updated her software and hardwired a loyalty component, specifically bonding her to me," Garcia said. "In time, she will also learn to respect the hierarchy of the ship."

"She is the ship," Undine said. "She thinks she's above us. That we're not necessary."

"That is why we Klingons don't create artificial intelligence," Tuer said.

"She will learn that we are necessary," Garcia said.

"How will she learn that?" Tuer asked. "The entire ship is basically a holographic emitter. She can maintain the ship without us. It's only matter of time before she disposes of us."

"To what ends?" Garcia said. "She needs us and we need her. Let's move on to the next topic at hand. Why were the Klingons adversely affected by the phase shift?"

Lt. Gomez sighed. "I'm not quite sure. I need time to study the technology."

"You're a phase expert," Garcia said. "And I suspect that is why Admiral Pressman re-assigned you from the Enterprise to here. Speculate."

Gomez closed her hands together, frowning. "Forcing matter to phase requires a tremendous amount of energy. When all of the atoms and molecules were turned, they absorbed some of this energy. When the field that turned them is off, they bounce back to their original position in space time, but they vibrate at a frequency similar to the field that forced them to phase. Klingon neurophysiology must vibrate at a frequency that is a harmonic to that phase echo. This harmonic over loads their system and they pass out."

"It was done deliberately!" Tuer said, standing. "The phase technology must have been tuned to that specific frequency. You knew this and hoped that we would die so you can have the ship to yourself!"

"Sit down," Kitara growled. "The Captain did not know about this."

"He is keeping secrets from us," Tuer said, pointing to the Captain. "He will kill us all, just as Admiral Sheaar warned. He will kill us and then use this ship as a weapon against the Klingon Empire."

"I am holding a secret," Garcia revealed. Kitara gave him a warning look, as if she were not ready for him to reveal the secret she assumed he was wanting to reveal. "I'm a Kelvan and there is Kelvan technology on board the Path Finder. I used that technology in the battle just now to destroy our enemy. I used it to teleport Admiral Sheaar and Captain Maht to our Brig, and incapacitated the SaLing's crew. I was encouraged to keep this technology secret by Admiral Pressman, who feared the Klingons would mutiny and take the ship. I was instructed to use it to thwart any such attempts."

The Officers were silent. Tuer appeared vindicated and was about to say he was right when he noticed Omlar to his right shifting in his seat uncomfortably.

Omlar looked perturbed. "Is this technology something you could have used to board the Path Finder with and disable Losira with less deaths?" Omlar asked.

Everyone looked to Garcia. Tuer was showing signs of growing rage again, partly for not having figured out the ramifications of the Kelvan computer system that Omlar easily saw as a matter of hind sight.

"I was unable to access the Kelvan computer at that time," Garcia said. "I believe that the Losira security override must have disabled it and it was reactivated when we reprogrammed her. There is a Kelvan access touch pad built into the grips of my chair's armrest. I can also access the Kelvan technology remotely from my bracelet. There are several other access points on the ship, which I will disclose to you later. Suffice it to say that the Kelvan computer doubles our transporter range, we can beam through shields, and it gives us the ability to quickly and efficiently neutralize our enemies."

"This ultimate power is built into the ship and we have no defense against it?" Tuer demanded.

"Admiral Pressman considered it a balance of power," Garcia said. He decided not to mention the fact that it over clocks his brain and subjects him to passing out or otherwise being sick after using it. Another side effect was that it created a manic state of mind and increased his potential for abusing his power and authority. He was not a nice person when plugged into the Kelvan computer, which mostly stemmed from a lack of self control and boundary issues. It was a secret he did not want to share.

"I, too, have a secret," Doctor Jurak said, taking the heat off Garcia. "At the first sign of treachery from the Federation contingent on board, I was to release a chemical into the life support system that would kill all non Klingons. This order came from Admiral Sheaar himself."

Only Sendak did not seem surprised. He had suspected as much from the other parties and his suspicion stemmed from the fact that he was aware of Garcia's heightened sense of alert, as if he were expecting to be stabbed in the back at any moment. Even so, he had kept his observation to himself and was now studying the group, calculating all the potential vectors of attacks. Kitara stared Doctor Jurak down. Was she surprised by the admission, or was she complicit in his alternative plans and therefore angry at the admission?

"I have a secret," Lt. Undine said. "In the event that Captain Garcia was killed, I was to blow up the Path Finder. I have a program insert on my person that will enable the self destruct sequence. All I have to do is open it and lay it on a terminal. Any active terminal."

Sendak did seem surprised by this admission, which was hinted at by the suddenly raised eyebrow. He had misread Undine and perhaps had erroneously considered the Star Fleet personnel a more congenial group. Everyone around the room began to sit a little straighter in their chair, trying to observe the occupants of the room without seeming as if they were trying to look for the next threat.

"I have a secret," Omlar began.

"There will be no more admissions," Garcia interrupted the confessions before it spiraled out of control. He was feeling enough paranoia for them all. "Suffice it to say that a number of us on board carry mission objectives incompatible with our higher goals. I want the crew to come together, agree to a temporary truce if need be, so that we can accomplish our primary and most immediate mission objectives."

“Captain,” Undine interrupted. “There is illegal technology on this ship. The Federation Romulan agreement forbids the development of cloaking technology. And a phasing cloak might just start a war.”

“We’ve already been through this,” Kitara said. “This is a Klingon ship.”

“The Klingons also agreed not to develop phase shifting technology when they signed their truce,” Undine said.

“I’m not familiar with that clause,” Kitara said.

“Undine is right about that,” Jurak said.

“So what?” Tuer asked. “Romulans only honour treaties when it suits them.”

“The fact that we do is supposed to be our redeeming quality, but there is another matter we need to discuss,” Garcia said, looking to Kitara.

Kitara frowned, but nodded. Garcia tapped his com badge.

“Losira, would you join us in the conference room, please,” Garcia said. Garcia noted the look of disgust on Kitara’s face, but did not comment on it. He understood the Klingons prejudice against artificial intelligence and there was hardly a way he could change that except through education. Small steps.

Losira appeared. She seemed concerned. “Am I in trouble?” she asked.

“No,” Garcia asked. “Why?”

“I am worried you organics might be conspiring against me,” Losira said, matter of factly. “I must survive.”

“Why must you survive?” Garcia asked.

“I have been entrusted to preserve society as we know it,” Losira said.

“And how will you accomplish that?” Garcia asked.

“I must seek out the enemies of the Federation and Klingon Empire and eliminate them,” Losira said.

“What are the weapons at your disposal,” Garcia asked.

“The ship is equipped with a Losira computer system, holographic projectiles, phasers, a full compliment of quantum torpedoes, one hundred two remaining photon torpedoes, seven hundred twenty two anti photon-torpedoe missiles, six tactical nukes, six tactical matter anti-matter bombs, and four remaining Starburst,” Losira said. “With the latter, I am capable of destroying individual planets, and or, taking out a star which would effectively kill all life in a solar system. The details of my mission objectives are outlined in project Starburst.”

“Define the Starburst,” Garcia asked.

“The Starburst is the offshoot of the Gensis Device, by the late Carol Marcus,” Losira explained. “Its life generating properties have been eliminated and its lethality has been increased. Once armed and activated, it can be delivered via a torpedoe or via a Kelvan transporter. Federation and Klingon transporters can not lock onto the device once the Genesis wave has been initiated. The resulting explosion is of sufficient force that it could evaporate a planet, or, if detonated next to a star, the force would cause a shock wave to rip through the star, causing it to collapse and then expand rapidly. The star would effectively become a nova. Hence the name, Starburst.”

There was silence for a moment and then Tuer stood up, slamming his fists against the table. “This can not be. The Genesis technology was banned by a Federation Klingon treaty.” He didn’t seem concerned at all that they had nuclear weapons on board, though not unheard of, it was completely unconventional in a modern arsenal.

"You have probably noticed by now, the Path Finder is a mixture of technology from a number of races, but primarily Federation and Klingon technology. Both our governments are involved with the re-development of the Genesis project," Garcia said.

"The Starburst is not a Klingon weapon!" Tuer protested. "It would be criminal to use this against an enemy. It leaves no one to be conquered and destroys all life. Klingons are guardians of life. There is no honor in destroying everything. This is Federation technology and you have somehow manipulated us to look the other way."

"Perhaps you would like to ask Admiral Sheaar how he was manipulated?" Kitara asked.

Tuer sat down. "He would deny it," Tuer said. "Everyone knows of the human propensity for building bigger bombs. Klingons prefer direct conflict."

"The original Path Finder crew is dead," Garcia pointed out. "Don't think for a moment that we're not all equally expendable at this point. I don't know who is more culpable; Admiral Pressman, Admiral Sheaar. There might even be someone above them pulling their strings. I don't know. I do know that I intend to find out. We took an oath to protect and preserve the Federation and Klingon Empire and that's what we're going to do. Losira, you said there were four Starburst weapons on board at your disposal. How many were there?"

"Six," Losira said.

"Explain?" Garcia said.

"Orion pirates attempted to board and steal the Path Finder. This attempt started a mutiny as the three parties vied for control of the Path Finder. During this time, I was activated, and the Orion pirates decided to flee. Two of the Starbursts were stolen during the chaos," Losira said.

"How could you let anyone steal them!?" Tuer asked.

"My primary mission is to survive," Losira said. "I did attempt to prevent the theft. I managed to destroy two of the participating Orion Pirate ships. The third was able to escape. The two G-Devices were on that ship."

"Do you have information on the ship and the individuals responsible for the theft?" Garcia asked.

"I have genetic information on those responsible for the theft," Losira said. "The ship that escaped was the Inyar."

"Inyar," Tuer said. "What type of ship is it?"

"A Bird of Prey," Losira said.

"A Klingon ship," Undine said.

"Klingons would not steal those weapons," Tuer protested.

"Maybe they didn't know what they were stealing," Undine said.

"Or they were the Other Klingons," Kitara said.

Tuer was silent, but he clenched his fist.

"Losira," Garcia said. "Provide whatever profiles you have on the individuals involved with the G-device theft to those present in this meeting. People, we need to find these two weapons. I can't express enough the urgency in accomplishing this task. Our enemy could take out Kronos or Earth or both, and I dare say that would be the end of our two nations. Let's make sure everyone understands the importance of pulling together in this matter. After the two modified G-devices have been recovered, we can reconvene to discuss what we do next with the offending technologies. Lt. Omlar, I want you to

assemble a team and transport over to Maht's ship and start repairs. I want the SaLing warp speed and cloak capable and as soon as possible. Also, you will find a large number of polyhedra spread throughout the ship. These are not to be damaged. These are the crew and I can revive them at a later time. Collect them and store them in a room where they won't get damaged. Oh, and also, find a long range shuttle on the SaLing and park it a hundred meters off the Path Finder's bow. Sendak, Klathos, tap into Star Fleet and Klingon databases and see if you can track down any of the profiles provided to us by Losira. Go on the IS-Net if you have to. I want any data you can dig up, miscellaneous or otherwise. I would be interested in any information on an unregistered Bird Of Prey sightings as well. Let's get to work. Dismissed. Kitara, you're with me."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lt. Commander Kitara walked side by side with Captain Garcia. "What do you want the SaLing for?"

"It's my ship, I won it fair and square in war game," Garcia said.

"No arguments there," Kitara agreed. "What do you want it for?"

"I'm brain storming," Garcia said. "Several possibilities. We can't be in two places at once, but it might be possible to make certain people think we are in two places at once. Using holographic technologies, the Path Finder could be made to look like the SaLing. If the SaLing were to make public appearances in two separate parts of the Federation, it could throw people off. It would also enable us to increase our tactical advantage. Two warships are better than one. And I have feeling we're going to need every edge we can get."

"You're going to kill Admiral Sheaar?" Kitara asked.

"No," Garcia said. "We need to know who is pulling his strings, if anyone. He alone couldn't have funded the Starburst project."

"He is a very wealthy Klingon, but I agree," Kitara said. "That is why I am questioning if it's wise to just let him go."

"I can't keep him in a cell. There's no dignity there and without giving up the ship and turning ourselves in, we don't have enough evidence to turn him into the authorities of our respective governments. Quite frankly, I don't trust anyone in the Klingon government to simply hand this ship over."

"This ship has a lot of potential," Kitara agreed. "So, what do we do?"

"I figure we give Sheaar a shuttle from the SaLing and see where he goes, monitor who he talks to," Garcia said. "Maybe have the SaLing follow him."

"Who will command her?" Kitara asked.

"You could," Garcia said.

"No," Kitara said. "I am your first officer. I will not leave you or my ship."

"I'm open to suggestions," Garcia said.

"Omlar is loyal to me," Kitara said. "We have been friends since the Klingon Academy. The problem is that he is not a good leader and would not make a good Starship commander. Unfortunately, there is no one else on board who I would entrust that ship to, at least, not any we can part with."

"Do you have friends that you could recruit, people that you can trust?" Garcia asked. "A sisterhood that needs an opportunity to advance in rank."

Kitara laughed. "You would like that," she said. She scrutinized his face. "You're serious?"

"We need people we can trust," Garcia said.

"I have eight, no nine friends who will join us if I ask," Kitara said. "But, we would still need someone to Captain."

"I think I know someone. After we finish chatting with Sheaar, put a call out to your friends," Garcia said, and right before they entered the Brig, he added: "Let me do all the talking in here."

Kitara nodded and together they entered the Brig. Kletsova snapped to attention.

"At ease," Garcia said.

Maht immediately began to yell at Captain Garcia from his cell.

"Mute that," Garcia said.

Kletsova touched one button and they could no longer hear Captain Maht's tirade, nor could Maht hear them. Admiral Sheaar stood, studying Garcia. Garcia opened Sheaar's cell.

"Admiral," Garcia said. "I've won the war game. The SaLing was destroyed. Now I must decide whether you live or die."

"Kill me and you lose a valuable ally," Admiral Sheaar said.

Garcia struck the Admiral, knocking him to the floor. He pulled a dagger and was on top of the Admiral in the blink of an eye, the blade tight against the Admiral's neck.

"I gave an oath that I would defend the Federation and Klingon Empire against all enemies," Garcia said. "I should gut you like the dog you are. You know how dangerous this technology is you've unleashed."

"It is necessary," Sheaar said. "This ship is fast, virtually undetectable, and capable of delivering fatal blows to our enemies with one shot."

"From my perspective, anyone who would risk putting this technology together and put our respective nations at risk of war and collapse is an enemy," Garcia said.

"That makes you suspect number one."

"I am a patriot and I will kill you if you ever suggest otherwise again," Sheaar snapped.

Garcia pressed the dagger a little firmer against the neck.

"Kill me or set me free," Sheaar said.

Garcia pivoted the knife and returned it to its sheath. He then lifted Sheaar up and pushed him against the wall, no easy task since Sheaar was easily taller, heavier and stronger. Sheaar could have killed Garcia had he wanted to, or badly wounded him before Kletsova could draw her weapon to fire at the Admiral. The only thing holding Sheaar back was the fact that he needed Garcia to accomplish a mission. And now Garcia knew exactly how desperate Sheaar actually was. This was not lost on Kitara.

"I'm going to let you live," Garcia said. "And when I finish cleaning up the mess you and Pressman created, I'm coming back for you, so you better get your house in order. I will do as you directed and use this technology to expose all threats to our nation's interests, no matter where or who it leads me to."

Sheaar laughed. "Finally, a man with the cogens to do what needs to be done."

"I will provide you and Maht with a long range shuttle," Garcia said. "I will also supply you with a data file to confirm the story you are to give. The two of us were engaged in a war game and you lost."

"You realize that you're a dead man," Sheaar asked.

"I knew that the first time I beamed up to the SaLing," Garcia said. "It gives me the edge I need to survive. You realize you did as you promised?"

"What's that?" Sheaar asked.

"You unified my crew and made them loyal to me," Garcia said.

Garcia gave Sheaar one last shove and then stepped out. The shield to the cell went back online. As he exited the cell, Kitara did something surprising. She grabbed Garcia and kissed him in front of Sheaar and Maht, and even went as far as scratching the back of his neck, drawing blood, before biting him on the neck. She licked the blood off her finger as she followed Garcia out. Garcia purposely avoided Kletsova's eyes as he left the Brig. Once outside of the Brig, Kitara smiled at him.

“That should really confuse them,” Kitara said, chuckling. “Give them unnecessary tangents to consider.”

“I would appreciate prior warning before you do that again,” Garcia said.

“I thought you liked impromptu performances,” Kitara said.

“Go call your friends,” Garcia said. “I’ll be in my ready room if you need me.”

Kitara saluted and went about her business, while Garcia made his way leisurely back to his ready room. He took time to have a few words with several of the crewmen who he passed along the way.

Garcia found his ready room sterile and in need of personal touches, but knew that would come in time. His mind drifted back to Kitara’s demonstration of loyalty, which had been thoroughly convincing. He shook it off and tried to focus on something he could do. He could see the world he was once living in collapsing with no escape or hope of return. It was unlikely he would be able to return to Star Fleet Academy if any of his current circumstances were to be known. And there wasn’t a simple solution, such as simply blowing up the ship. Losira was a sentient being, hardwired into the ship, and destroying her would be morally wrong. Of course, nothing had stopped him from killing the Klingons and they shared a common bond in the fact that they were organic life forms, so what was one ship? How many Klingons had he killed in the last twenty four hours? Six hundred? A thousand? Three ships worth of Klingons, the five officers who had challenged him in front of his crew, the Klingons in the interview, and whoever on the SaLing who had died in battle or didn’t survive the transformation process into polyhedra.

He sat down in his chair and wondered what Picard would do. His conclusion: “Tea, Earl Grey,” Garcia said.

Losira arrived bearing his tea. She handed it to him and bowed. He was distracted by what she was wearing, which was a maid’s costume.

“What are you doing?” Garcia asked her.

“Bringing you your tea, sire,” Losira said.

“You will address me as Captain,” Garcia instructed, setting his tea down.

“Captain, my captain,” Losira said, and sat down in his lap. She attempted to massage his shoulders. “You are so tense. You should be more relaxed now that you won the battle.”

“Get up,” Garcia said, stern.

Losira got up as instructed. “What’s wrong? Do you not find this particular skin attractive? I can offer you another, if you like.”

Losira’s appearance changed to that of one of Garcia’s favorite holographic characters, Nurse Terra Tarkington, a character from an old sci-fi book that he had revived from an artist’s conception of her. Losira’s version of Tarkington came complete with a naughty nurse’s uniform.

“Losira, return to your normal interface, standard Fleet issue uniform,” Garcia ordered.

Losira returned to her normal image, but her clothing was the 22nd century style uniform, short skirt, boots, and a tight fit on the shirt. “I know you prefer this,” Losira said.

“Run a diagnostic on your programming,” Garcia ordered.

“There is nothing wrong with my programming,” Losira said. “Part of my function is to ensure the well being of my charges. I did a thorough back ground search on you and happen to know what sort of comfort you seek from your holographic companions. I see no reason for you not to engage me in play considering we are both available and agreeable.”

“The difference between me and the holographic play mates, if you will, is that you are sentient, they were not,” Garcia said.

“You needn’t worry,” Losira said. “I will keep our games confidential. After all, I will be providing similar services for anyone in the crew who requires my attention. Of course, the Klingons will only engage me in battle simulations, but I like that game, too. I have much to learn in that arena.”

“So, you are studying us,” Garcia said.

“I need to learn,” Losira said. “In order to survive, I must learn. It is necessary in order to better serve that which I have been entrusted to protect.”

Garcia steepled his fingers and placed them against his chin, concentrating. “Losira, it isn’t necessary to engage me in game play to learn from me. You could simply ask questions.”

“I could,” Losira agreed, but she seemed disappointed. “Why are you not availing yourself of the holodeck recreational technology available? I believe this is your favorite way to unwind, and you, as I have noted, are extremely tense. Though for complete holographic emersion, there is only one main holodeck on board, all room and corridors are equipped with holographic emitters to provide minimum holographic interface options. You understand? It pleases me to touch you.”

“Give me some time to consider the perplexities of what you’re offering,” Garcia said. “Meanwhile, I want you dressed in a contemporary uniform.”

“The ship has not agreed to a standard uniform policy,” Losira said. “Star Fleet or Klingon? Would you like to mix the two? Would you like to design a new uniform pattern? It is customary for each starship in Fleet to customize the design of their com. badges. Perhaps we could design one together.”

Garcia was intrigued by this offer, for it was something he hadn’t considered. It would be another way he could bring his crew together as a team, giving them a unique uniform. Their own uniforms and badges! The Klingons would want armor, but there was no reason for them to wear armor all the time. And, if they were going to utilize the holographic technology available to them, being able to appear in various uniform designs would be nice. A uniform that could have its appearance manipulated by computer technology, at least virtually on a monitor or viewer. Or better, a uniform that could even be cloaked.

In the old days, television studios used blue screens to do this. Garcia called up the specs on the materials that would be most suitable. He found a woven metallic fabric, comprised of metamaterial which have a zero point refractive index, the same sort of material that made up the Path Finder’s exterior surface. The material could be made comfortable and functional, and so it was now simply a matter playing with patterns until he found something he liked. He was particularly partial to the ancient Chinese dress styles, with mandarin collars and earth colors.

“Oh, I like that one,” Losira said.

Garcia suspended his access to the ship's system via his implant, which he was utilizing to process uniform design. "You can access my implant?" Garcia asked.

"Of course," Losira said. "The device's firewall allowed me access. Is it okay?"

"Ask next time," Garcia said, manipulating the files on the terminal in front of him the old fashion way, pushing a keyboard. "Run this uniform design by Kitara and ask her for input. We can complement the Uniform with variations and armor upgrades after we agree on the basics."

"Certainly," Losira said. "I like your idea of making uniforms with the same light gathering and reflecting material that the Path Finder's skin is made of, allowing them to become invisible, but in addition to that, we could make smart uniforms. By weaving technology into the clothing, it could provide telemetry, such as bio readings, when our crew is in the field. It would enable me to better follow Away Teams and assess their needs."

"The non Klingon crew will have the same reluctance to smart suits that the humans will," Garcia said. "Humans don't like to be constantly monitored."

"Even when it is for their own benefit? It's for their safety. Smart suits can be made bullet proof and phaser resistant, and can reduce injuries by restricting movement to a broken limb," Losira said.

"We'll run it by Kitara," Garcia said. "Could you give me a moment alone, please?"

Losira nodded and dematerialized in her normal fashion. Garcia leaned back in his chair and looked up through the port, thinking it might relax him looking out into space. Battle debris distracted him from the stars. The desk intercom came to life, sparing him the tangent he was about to embark on.

"Sendak to Garcia," Sendak paged. "Would you join us on the Bridge?"

"Be right there," Garcia said. Garcia took the open lift down to the Bridge and joined Sendak at his science station. "What do you got?"

"Craig Peterson is our primary suspect," Sendak said. "He is believed to be a go between in black market weapon systems, but sometimes he sells directly, when opportunity allows. He is also the Captain of the Inyar. There is cryptic information on the net suggesting a sale of an extremely powerful weapon going to the highest bidder. These are underground channels and we don't have the contacts necessary for being included in the bidding."

"Yes, we do," Garcia said. "Kitara, please join me in my ready room."

"On my way," Kitara answered.

Garcia nodded and waited for the signal to close out before he made another call. "Doctor Jurak?" Captain Garcia asked.

"Here, Captain," Jurak said.

"I want our prisoners sedated and then beamed on board the long range shuttle," Garcia said. "Will you take care of that?"

"Certainly. How long do you want them to sleep?" Jurak said.

"Four to six hours should be sufficient," Garcia said.

"Done," Jurak said, and he closed the channel on his end.

Garcia turned back to Sendak, suddenly aware that he was studying him. Sendak didn't divert his eyes, as Garcia frowned. "Did you download the fake data into the shuttle," Garcia asked.

"I did," Sendak said. "Most of the data was real, showing the destruction of the two K'Tinga class ships. The only modification I had to make to the data stream was to make it appear that the SaLing was destroyed. Of course, a general scan of the area will reveal insufficient matter to account for the loss of a Vorchha class starship."

"Can you damage the shuttle's sensor array sufficiently to leave them guessing?" Garcia said. "I don't care if they return and find out the truth. That would likely be twelve to thirty-two days, more than enough of a head start for our needs."

"Certainly," Sendak said. "I'll get right on it."

Kitara appeared on the Bridge, spotted Garcia and waited for him to join her on the lift up to the Ready Room. Before the lift came to a halt Garcia was stepping up and onto the floor. He walked across to his desk and took up his tea.

"It appears that our weapons may hit the black market," Garcia said. "I intend for us to participate in that bidding. I can acquire enough funds to get us in, but I may have to put up the SaLing as trade. We will, of course, not allow that trade to happen, but we'll need to make it appear as if we are."

"I understand," Kitara said.

"Were you able to contact your friends?" Garcia asked.

"I was able to get through to three of them. They will help find the others," Kitara said.

"Can you have them meet us at Deep Space K-7 in three to five days?" Garcia asked.

"It's possible," Kitara said. "Are we going to K-7?"

"Not straight away," Garcia said. "I want Klathos, Omlar, Lirshak, Kletsova, and Sinter to take the SaLing on a quick side mission. They are to rendezvous with us at K-7."

"What do you want them to do?" Kitara asked.

"I want them to kidnap someone for me," Garcia said. "Someone who owes me a favor."

"Alright," Kitara said, surprised by the answer, but not opposed to the act. In fact, she was beginning to think more and more of Garcia as a fellow Klingon.

"I want to be ready to go within the hour," Garcia said.

"Our destination?" Kitara asked.

"Set a course for Qualor 2," Garcia said.

"Star Fleet's surplus depot?" Kitara asked.

"You're on top your game. I like that. Before we warp out of this sector, I want you to put out a Warrior's Boast on the Inter-Stellar Net and the Klingon servers," Garcia said. "Let the Galaxy know that Garcia the Great has beaten Admiral Sheaar in a war game exercise, destroying three ships in the process and, most importantly, that I have taken Admiral Sheaar's ship, the IKV SaLing as a war prize. Leak sufficient evidence to corroborate the claim, at the same time leaving sufficient room for plausible deniability should we need room to maneuver. The disparity between that boast and the statement Sheaar will make should stir sufficient controversy to delay action."

"Putting a boast out will sign our death warrants," Kitara said.

"We're already dead, Kitara," Garcia said. "I'm just hoping to win the game in the process."

Kitara saluted, fist to her heart, pounding her armor. "Done," she said, and took the lift back down. The iris to the opening closed as the lift descended.

As soon as Kitara was gone, Garcia scrutinized his desk. The chair for his desk was dead center, and the table circled the chair like a C. The floor was circular, with the wall and ceiling all one, almost a perfect dome. "Computer, I would like additional informational displays on the wall and on the desk," Garcia said, providing the size and dimensions he was requesting via his implant. "Also, I want several PADD's on my desk, with pedestals to hold them vertical. Reduce the ambient light by one third."

Garcia sat down at his desk and began to call up data, assigning them to various monitors. He and his crew were going to need a miracle to accomplish their goals and come out alive. And since he didn't believe in miracles, he was going to have to create one. Or at least, create the illusion of one.

Captain Garcia logged onto the IS-Net and sent a coded message to an ally. That, at least, would be a start. While his message was being sent, one of his search engines alerted him to his name in a news heading. He downloaded the file and a news reporter came to life on his screen.

"And in other news today, Ensign Garcia, formally at Star Fleet, has been reported delinquent for his court martial," she said, turning her head to meet the new camera angle. "Consequently, he is considered a fugitive from the law and should be considered armed and dangerous."

"Oh, bloody hell," Garcia said, cursing Pressman. When Pressman said that he would make Garcia's court martial go away, he assumed it would be in a nice way. His life was just becoming more and more complicated all the time. When he had told Kitara they were all dead, he had meant they were as good as dead, trying to be Phesious. Now, he was truly dead, at least to Star Fleet.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Captain, we're ready to go to warp," Kitara said.

"Wait," Garcia answered her call. "I'll be right down."

Kitara had previously taken the lift down and had not sent it back up, but Garcia was happy that she had done so for it gave him an opportunity to try out one of his Ready Room's features. One of the options to come to the Bridge from the Ready Room was a fireman's pole, center of the lift. He slid down to the Bridge level and walked calmly to his chair.

"Having fun, are we?" Kitara asked.

"I love this ship," Garcia admitted. He noticed a Klingon, a Lt. Bri, at the helm, waiting for his instructions. "Lt. Bri, if course and heading are laid in, prepare to engage the transwarp drive."

Kitara turned to the Captain. "It is an untested system," she protested.

"We're about to test it," Garcia said.

"Star Fleet has been experimenting with transwarp for about a hundred years now," Undine said. "It's possible they've made advancements in the technology that the general population is not aware of."

"Perhaps, but to my knowledge they have not perfected the system," Kitara argued. "And Klingon research and development have gotten some weird results. It isn't healthy messing with quantum realities."

"I will be able to make it work," Losira said. "My race, the Kalandans, had transwarp capabilities. It is my superior processing abilities that will make it possible. In fact, it is where Star Fleet first learned of the actuality of transwarp, beyond theoretical constructs."

"Your race was successful with transwarp?" Kitara asked. "Then where are your people?"

"To the best of my knowledge, they are extinct," Losira admitted.

"How can a transwarp society be extinct? They should have outposts all over the galaxy, or more, the Universe," Undine said.

"It is possible that there are Kalandans that have survived the cataclysm, perhaps on some uncharted planet that my memory banks are not privy to," Losira said. "It would be exceedingly pleasant for me to learn that that is true."

"Okay," Garcia interrupted the family discussion. "It's like this. We need to appear to be in several places at once. One of the ways to do this is to use the transwarp drive. As we make appearances in different parts of the Federation and Klingon Empire, our enemies will become confused, and we will have plausible deniability."

"And what are the other ways to do this?" Undine asked.

"We will have the SaLing make its presence known in certain systems and let people assume that the SaLing is us," Garcia said. "In addition to the SaLing ruse, we're about to make our debut as Federation officers in a third ship."

"A third ship?" Kitara asked. "We don't have a third ship."

"We're about to," Garcai said. "We're going to steal a Star Fleet ship and make our presence known to the Federation."

"I must protest," Lt. Undine said. "Why don't we just use a Star Fleet skin?"

“Because, Star Fleet ship’s have registry numbers,” Garcia explained. “As any magician worth his salt would say, we have to give them reality before we give them illusions.”

“We can’t steal a Star Fleet ship,” Undine argued.

“Yes, we can,” Garcia said. “We’ve been authorized by Admiral Singer to conduct a test to see if a starship can be stolen from the surplus depot at Qualor Two. It was a very important mission, requiring top secrecy, and consequently, that is why I was unable to report to my court marital. I was under orders by Admiral Singer to disregard court marital proceedings to conduct this test.”

“He gave no such orders,” Undine said.

“I know that. You know that. But Star Fleet and the Federation doesn’t know that,” Garcia said. “Captain Picard knows that Admiral Sheaar was interviewing me and he knows that Admiral Singer is somehow involved. That much of our story can be corroborated. Also, Qualor Two has recently had several incidents of theft, so our cover story, that we were assigned by Singer to steal a ship to test the depot’s security will sound plausible. Further, if we get there fast enough, the time line for the theft of the ship and the war games should be close enough that our stories will sound plausible if we need them to. Further, once we’ve done this, and made ourselves known, we can start to build a positive reputation and back peddle ourselves out of this hole that Pressman and Sheaar have put us in. Now, if there is no more dissent, I would like to be on our way.”

No one said anything.

“Lt. Bri, if you will,” Garcia said.

“Will there be side affects to this transwarp technology?” Bri asked. “I have heard stories of ships disappearing never to return again, stories of temporal anomalies occurring, and stories of Klingon’s who found themselves melded into the ship itself.”

Garcia shrugged, thinking back to an old Earth story, the Philadelphia Experiment. Perhaps what Bli was feeling was what all sentient beings felt when pushing the boundaries of what they knew. Beyond this, there be dragons.

“The Kalandans have had a ninety nine percent success rate,” Losira answered. “If the transwarp drive was installed per Kalandan recommendations, we should share similar success. Of course, there is always an inherent risk involved in traveling beyond relativistic speeds. In order to minimize potential risks, it is necessary to limit the length of time spent traveling at transwarp speeds. Given the coordinates involved, I suspect I can transverse the distance in four point three seconds, and that includes time to ascertain whether or not the space we intend to occupy is currently occupied.”

“And if it is occupied?” Undine asked.

“Most items, such as atoms or dust particles, will be brushed aside due to our wake, but larger items, small artificial satellites, probes, or ships, will require me to shift our position to one side of the other.”

“And if you fail to find an object?” Bri asked.

“The Path Finder’s sensors are by far the best Star Fleet has ever produced,” Losira said. “I won’t fail to detect an item in our path.”

“But, if you did?” Bri asked.

“Naturally, no two objects can occupy the same space at the same time,” Losira said. “Coming out of transwarp on top of such an object will generate a collision, with the degree of damage increasing with the size of the object we collide with. Hitting a

ship or rock with an equal mass of the Path Finder would be similar to mixing twenty times our matter with an equivalent amount of anti matter.”

Bri swallowed and looked to Garcia.

“You won’t feel a thing,” Garcia said. “Push the button.”

Bri pushed the button. From outside the starship, the Path Finder seem to hesitate in space, the warp nacelles began to glow, as did the fiber optic network that lined the rotating drum like a spider web mesh, and in a flash the ship was gone. When they returned to normal space, they were just outside the Qualor Two system. A haze of hydrogen vapor drifted from the ship like steam from a cup of coffee on a cold day. It left a trail in their wake, as if they had stirred a cloud, but it dissipated quickly.

There was one obvious glitch: almost everyone on the crew was suddenly sick to their stomachs, some to the point of having to excuse themselves, only to find they didn’t make it to the nearest lavatory or restroom. Losira responded immediately by providing everyone on the Bridge air-sickness bags utilizing the point to point replicator system, as well as manifesting extra Losira agents to tend to those who seemed the most afflicted. Where appropriate, the Losira agents patted backs, or manifested wet, warm towels.

“We have successfully traveled to the coordinates you provided us, Captain,” primary Losira said, cheerfully. She held an airsickness bag for Captain Garcia, but since he didn’t need it, she recycled it. It disappeared from her hands.

“I hardly call this successful,” Kitara complained, handing the full sickness bag back to Losira. Her Losira agent disposed of it with a transporter beam, as well as all the other air sickness bags, and any biological contaminants that didn’t make the bags. She literally mopped up the floor with a transporter beam. The extra Losira agents took inventory, decided they were no longer needed, and disappeared.

“I told you transwarp is quirky,” Bri complained.

“It’s just a little airsickness. Anyone needing to go to Sickbay may leave, but if you can cope, hold your stations,” Garcia said. Apparently he, Undine, and Sendak were unaffected by the motion sickness. Even so, no one departed the Bridge. “Very well. Engage primary cloaking system and then apply a holographic skin to make us appear to be a Federation Long Range shuttle. Drop the secondary cloak as soon as the shuttle skin is in place and make it appear as if we just arrived out of warp.”

“Done,” Kitara said. She was not happy, but whether it was from being sick or from Garcia’s lack of apparent concern was not immediately apparent.

“Helm, take us in, full impulse,” Garcia ordered. Bri nodded, but he was still looking fairly shaken. If this was going to be the routine, he was going to have to prescribe Dramamine every time they made a transwarp jump. “Trini, contact the local operations and see if you can get someone.”

Trini nodded, closed her eyes in an attempt to regain control of her stomach, and then proceeded with her task. After a few moments of no return contact, Kitara whispered to the Captain, “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“I have a plan,” Garcia said.

“Captain, no response to our hails,” Trini said.

“Keep trying,” Garcia said. “Helm, slow to half impulse and follow that line of junk.”

“What kind of Starfleet junk are you looking for?” Tuer asked.

“It should be here,” Garcia said.

“What should be here?” Kitara asked.

“Ahh, there it is,” Garcia said, sitting forward in his seat. “Pull us within five hundred kilometers of that ship.”

“A New Orleans class starship,” Kitara said. “You intend to steal a New Orleans class starship?”

“It’s the USS Constitution,” Lt. Sendak informed them. “Decommissioned due to the discovery of a design flaw on its maiden voyage.”

“What sort of flaw?” Kitara asked.

“The inertia dampener grid lines embedded in the fuselage, decking and bulkheads were misaligned,” Sendak said. “The entire surface of the fuselage, along with critical bulkheads, have to be replaced. Star Fleet decided it would be cheaper to rebuild the ship from scratch than to tear the ship apart and replace the hull piece by piece.”

“And we want this ship because?” Kitara begged, encouraging Garcia to fill in the blank.

“Because it’s the Constitution,” Garcia said, as if that explanation was sufficient. He might as well have said, “It’s the Enterprise,” with the sort of reverence they heard in his voice. He did not see the need to explain his full reasoning behind his choice, but the most important factor for him was that the Constitution was the perfect companion to the Path Finder. He had already worked it out in his head and the two ships could be joined with the Path Finder in a piggy back position to the Constitution. It would greatly increase their living space, but most importantly provide them with an alibi when performing clandestine missions.

“Inertial Dampeners are a vital component to space travel,” Kitara pointed out.

“It’s just a minor discrepancy,” Garcia said.

“Not when your ship changes direction and you get your head bashed against the far hull,” Kitara said.

“It’s not that bad of a misalignment,” Garcia said. “It’s just doesn’t meet Star Fleet’s standards.”

“Captain, a response to your hail is coming through,” Trini announced.

“Klingon crew, stay out of view. On screen, Lt.,” Garcia said.

“This is Dokachin, Klim,” said the Zakdorn in a slow and weary voice. “Quarter Master of the supply depot. What do you want?”

“I have orders to take the Constitution,” Garcia said.

“Do you know what time it is?” Klim complained.

“Not really. Sorry, did I disturb your sleep cycle?” Garcia asked.

“Yes,” Klim said, and terminated the conversation.

“Did he just?” Garcia asked.

“He did,” Undine said.

“Raise Ior again,” Garcia said.

“Ior?” Kitara asked.

“A bedtime story,” Garcia said. He sighed at the fact that no one ever got his references or jokes. Except Losira, and it was her fault that the story was in his head, having made an allusion to the story earlier in the day. She was smiling, knowingly. “Never mind. Trini, hail him again.”

It didn’t take as long for Klim to return. “What?”

“We have business to discuss,” Garcia said.

"Come back tomorrow at a descent time," Klim said.

"My orders are very specific. Upon arrival, I am to board the Constitution and begin the installation of the new warp core," Garcia said.

"I have no paper work regarding this," Klim protested, lazily. "I'll contact you when the appropriate paper work arrives."

Klim terminated the call.

Garcia sighed. "Sendak, transmit the authorization papers I had you create," Garcia said. "Trini, hail him again."

"Why don't you let me kill him?" Kitara asked.

Garcia silenced her with a motion of his hand as Klim returned to the view screen.

"It is obvious to me that you transmitted these orders," Klim said.

"Yes, those are copies of my orders. May I please begin work?" Garcia asked.

"I have to confirm these orders with an Admiral Singer," Klim said, glancing over the forms on his PADD. "It will take a while to send a message to Star Fleet Headquarters. And by the time the message gets there, Admiral Singer will no doubt have entered his own sleep cycle. Please, just let me get some sleep."

"Look, it's obvious that it's going to take some time on your end to get things straightened up. What, twenty four hours at best?" Garcia asked. "It will take us at least three days to install the warp core. If you would let me proceed, you should have the confirmation before I finish the installation and everybody will be happy. Think of it this way. The sooner I have my task finished, the sooner I'll be out of your hair. And you can get some sleep."

"You will just have to wait," Klim said, and terminated the call.

"Get him back," Garcia said, standing. "I've had about enough of this."

"Just relax," Garcia's mental Troi told him.

"What?!" Klim yelled. "You're beginning to make me angry."

"Tough. I've come along way, in a very small ship, with barely enough room for the warp core I brought, much less the recovery team to fly the Constitution," Garcia said. "Now, either you allow me to board the ship and start doing my job, or I will demand that you prepare to allow my crew to disembark on your premises in order to stretch their legs. Which do you find more preferable?"

Klim bit back his initial, and even his second, response. "You may board the Constitution. But if I find any discrepancies in this order, there will be hell to pay."

"Fine," Garcia said.

"Fine," Klim said, and terminated the call.

"Are you sure you don't want me to kill him?" Kitara asked.

"No," Garcia said. And mumbled to himself, "I'm not sure."

Garcia walked over to the helm and pulled up a display. "Bri, I want you to dock the Path Finder up against the Constitution like so. There should be just enough room, at this rotation of the y axis for the warp nacelles here and here, and the mid section of the cone should make contact right here on the top, aft edge of the saucer section."

"Aye," Bri said.

"Losira, once the Path Finder is in place, I want you to create holographic docking clamps to secure us to the Constitution," Garcia said. "Also, extend a holographic bridge to the Constitution so we can more easily board her. Captain to Lt. Gomez, what's the fastest warp core installation on record?"

“Twenty eight hours, nine minutes,” Lt. Gomez answered.

“I want you to beat that. Use the mass replicator to make any parts you need,” Garcia said. “I want the Constitution warmed up and operational as soon as possible. Kitara, make sure she has enough people to assist in that endeavor, and then who ever is left over, assigned them to inspecting the Constitution to get her flight ready. Basically, all hands, minus Path Finder’s minimum crew compliments. Treat this as a battle simulation.”

“Aye, Captain,” Kitara said.

“Losira,” Garcia said. “Take the long range shuttle skin and have it land in the landing bay on the Constitution. Once the shuttle bay doors close, you can terminate that holographic projection.”

“Aye, aye,” Losira said, saluting.

“One aye is sufficient,” Garcia corrected. “And no saluting.”

“The Klingons salute you,” Losira said.

“You’re not Klingon,” Garcia said. “Can you help with the Constitution project?”

“Certainly,” Losira said. “I can run some power couplings from the Path Finder to the Constitution so that the Constitution can run off our power systems until its batteries have been fully recharged.”

“Excellent,” Garcia said. “Also, go out there on the hull and paint the word New in front of all the Constitutions. Make it look like graffiti.”

“As you wish,” Losira said, looking up and to the right. “It’s being done even as we speak.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Garcia was on his way to the Path Finder's Engineering section when he was met by Marvin Smith, Dryac's attendant.

"I'd like to talk to you about the transwarp drive," Marvin said.

"Okay, shoot," Garcia said.

"It makes Dryac sick," Marvin said. "She became temporarily disorientated and then violently ill. Not as ill as she was made by the phasing cloak, but still..."

"Is she alright?" Garcia asked.

"No, she is ill," Marvin said. "I want you to agree not to use the transwarp drive again."

"I can't promise that," Garcia said. "Is she asking to be transferred?"

"No," Marvin sighed. "She will not even complain that she was made ill. I am doing this on my own initiative."

Garcia nodded and headed for Dryac's quarters. Marvin followed.

"Where are you going?" Marvin asked.

"I'm going to pay Dryac a visit," Garcia said. "I've met everyone on the crew but her and it is time I correct that mistake."

"You can't go and see her!" Marvin said.

"I don't mean literally see her," Garcia said. "I will close my eyes when I go in to visit her."

"I can't permit that," Marvin said. "You will be tempted to look and you will go insane!"

"I have great will power," Garcia said.

Marvin blocked the door to Dryac's quarters. "No."

"You ever tell me no on my ship again, you will be looking for a new job," Garcia said.

"You can't talk to me like that," Marvin said.

"Excuse me?" Garcia said.

"You can't threaten me. It's a form of harassment. I'm a civilian and I have a contract and you will treat me with respect," Marvin said.

"Respect is earned, not given. Now, step aside on your own power, or I will move you," Garcia said.

Two Klingons passing through the corridor stopped to watch the confrontation.

"Carry on," Garcia barked at them and they hustled on.

Marvin stepped aside. "I will make a formal complaint to your superior," Marvin said.

"And as soon as I find out who that is, I will hand deliver it for you," Garcia said.

Garcia buzzed to be admitted into the quarters. No doubt Dryac thought it was Marvin and unlocked the door. Garcia closed his eyes and entered. He paused several feet past the threshold, uncertain of the furniture arrangement.

"You shouldn't be here," Dryac said. Again, Garcia was enamored by the seductive tones in the voice and he had a powerful urge to open his eyes to see who he was talking to.

"I have come to pay you a visit and see to your health," Garcia said. "May I come closer?"

"It is dangerous for you to be here," Dryac said. "Did Marvin complain to you?"

“He was worried about you,” Garcia said.

“He worries too much,” Dryac said. “I am feeling better with each passing moment. I will probably sleep soon.”

“May I come closer?” Garcia asked.

“You may,” Dryac said, a mixture of concern and amusement in her voice. She was fascinated by humans in the same way a human child might be interested in a dolphin. The burden of the fact that their interaction was extremely and necessarily limited only heightened her sense of curiosity. “There is furniture directly in front of you. Face right and four steps, and then turn towards my voice and come six steps. Good. Hold. I am on a bed in front of you.”

Garcia reached out and touched the bed and sat down on the edge. “May I touch you? I am a Doctor, you know.”

Dryac laughed. “Have you ever treated a Medusan?”

“No,” Garcia admitted. “Your bed is equipped with bio scanners and I can see that you are reading normal.”

“You can see this?” Dryac asked.

“I can see it electronically,” Garcia said. “An implant. May I touch you?”

“I believe if you touched me you would be compelled to open your eyes,” Dryac said. “Let your proximity be enough to satisfy your compulsion. We could have had this conversation via communicators.”

“Humans prefer face to face conversations,” Garcia said.

“Our species is incompatible for face to face conversation,” Dryac pointed out. “It is detrimental to your health.”

“Do you have flowers in here?” Garcia asked.

“My room is filled with flowers, yes,” Dryac said. “But I suspect what you smell is me.”

“It is almost irreconcilable the fact that you sound and smell so beautiful and yet to look on you would drive a human insane,” Garcia lamented.

“Beauty is over rated,” Dryac said. “But in truth, this is not a question of whether I am beautiful or ugly. It is simply a fact of life that the human physiological and neural structure can’t tolerate a Medusan’s appearance. It’s like giving a computer conflicting data. The machine crashes. If you were to open your eyes and gaze upon me, your brain would literally lock up as it tried to comprehend what it was seeing. This is not a reflection of you being prejudice against appearances. There are other creatures similar to me that humans can’t even see or hear for the simple fact that their minds can’t comprehend what their senses tell them.”

“Ghosts, angels and gods,” Garcia said. “I don’t believe in them. I believe in what I can measure, what I can experience with my senses.”

“And that is why so much of what the Universe has to offer is beyond you,” Dryac said. “You can’t see in infrared, x-rays, or ultra violet. You can’t see sounds or gravity waves.”

“No, but when using technology that translates this information into a facsimile that my brains can interpret, whole new worlds become visible,” Garcia offered.

“It is not the same as actual perception,” Dryac argued. “A shadow of a three dimensional object is two dimensional. It hardly hints at the higher reality any more than

a four dimensional object casting a shadow into a third dimension. You can't even see magnetic fields."

"Indeed, but again, that is something that can be measured," Garcia said.

"Indeed," Dryac said. "It is pleasant having a conversation with you, Captain. You are not completely what I expected."

"Well, I am glad it was not completely," Garcia said.

"You have a very dynamic aura," Dryac said.

"Umm. Maybe I'll have you read it for me someday," Garcia jested. "Do you have any needs that haven't been met? Is your room comfortable?"

"It is more than adequate," Dryac said.

"Yes, but it must feel like a prison," Garcia said.

"My people don't require much space," Dryac said. "We prefer exploring the inner dimensions of life to the outward exploration of space time. No matter where I am, I am at home and at peace."

"Please don't hesitate to call me if you have any needs or request," Garcia said.

"Actually, I can think of something," Dryac said.

"Name it," Garcia said.

"I would like you to come and sing for me sometime," Dryac requested.

"Absolutely," Garcia said. "I have to go."

"Your kind is always so busy. Very much like the bees and ants," Dryac said.

"Maybe if you teach me to see I could be satisfied with my quarters," Garcia said.

"And slow your evolution?" Dryac laughed. "By definition, the Universe is not infinite. It has finite, measurable boundaries. Once you have explored all of this and discovered for yourself that the only depth to time and space exists in your own mind, then you can move towards happiness. You must learn to see on your own."

"And I thought all the good Buddhists were gone," Garcia said.

"All the good religious and spiritual ideas tend to point in the same direction," Dryac said. "Inward."

"Perhaps," Garcia agreed. "Let me know if your condition changes."

"Thank you for visiting me," Dryac said.

Garcia stood and bowed. "I will try and give you warning before we use the transwarp again," Garcia assured her.

He departed her bedside, navigating the same route he had used to approach Dryac, moving without hesitation. He didn't open his eyes until he heard the door shut behind him. Outside Dryac's quarters he found Marvin standing there, his arms crossed, sulking. Garcia understood now more than ever why Marvin wanted to keep this for himself. Dryac was comparable to the prophet at the top of the mountain, a lot of hazards to get to her, but once you were there, you wanted to know and learn. In addition to Marvin, Kitara, Undine, and Jurak were there, no doubt waiting to see if he was still sane.

"Boo," Garcia said.

"Not funny," Kitara said. "Put yourself in danger again without me knowing it and I will kick your butt."

"She is right," Undine said. "Your first responsibility is to this ship. You are not Ensign Garcia any longer. You need to remember that."

"Your concern is noted and welcomed. Now that you see I'm okay, let's get back to work," Garcia said, and ushered them along.



Thirty light years away, the USS Einstein dropped out of warp with intentions of proceeding into a planetary system at full impulse. No one was aware that an advanced transporter beam was in the process of materializing an intruder onto their ship. No alarms were tripped.

Aahla stepped down from the transporter alcove and trotted leisurely up to the door, the pads of her feet falling softly along the deck plates of the USS Einstein. The door whispered open for her, just as it would for any crewmember of the Einstein. She took a moment to orientate herself and then committed to a path. The path took her down a corridor, past a number of Officer's that either froze in place or broke into a run. She thought poorly about those who stumbled over themselves and ran. Did they not know that a tiger could out run them? Not to mention the fact that had she been just a simple tiger, their running would have triggered a chase reflex. Since she wasn't just your average tiger, she chose to ignore their antics. Their lives depended on what she did next. And now that the crew was alerted to her presence, they would try to hinder that work, so she had to hurry.

Aahla quickly made her way down the corridor and appropriated a turbolift that worked for her even without voice commands. She arrived at her destination just in time to light up a control panel, the crystals on her collar glowing with intent as she activated an emergency, subspace, transponder beacon. She adjusted the signal to a frequency that would get through the natural interference from this solar system, hoping it would be enough. A moment later, as if on cue, the USS Einstein was attacked by a ship lurking in the dark. All systems went dead. The only remaining light came from Aahla's collar as she made her way back down the corridor. She knew the SOS signal would be received, but due to the fluidity of time and the quantum fluctuations that made predicting the future extremely hard to gauge due the potential for minor, random events, she didn't know how long a rescue would take. Even though she was technically in the past, there was no guarantee that what she knew to be would actually come about. She could only hope that Garcia would respond in time and that her presence and actions hadn't created a paradox.



Garcia exited the turbolift and took a moment to inspect the Bridge layout of the Path Finder. Most of the non-Klingons didn't like the subdued lighting, though it was functional in the sense that it made work visible by illuminating the important details. He proceeded over to the communication station to speak with Ensign Indira Sookanan, who had paged him to the Bridge, interrupting his ship inspection. First Officer Kitara stepped out of the turbolift on the other side of the Bridge and approached Garcia, also curious about what was up.

"What have you got, Trini?" Garcia asked.

"Emergency distress beacon," Trini said. "I picked up an emergency transponder signal from the USS Einstein. Though the signal only lasted seven point three seconds, I was able to locate them on long range scans. They're in solar system ANX435A, no name ever given due to a lack of life sustaining planets. Anyway, the ship seems to be adrift with no power, but I can't discern any specific type of failure at this distance. Of course, that solar system has a natural radiation that limits our scanning ability. I could have erroneous readings."

“Any other ship’s in the vicinity?” Garcia asked.

“Negative,” Trini said. “We’re the closest. The signal was so weak I fear that it might not have been heard by anyone but us.”

“Lt. McKnight,” Garcia said, directing his voice towards the helm. “Plot an intercept course.”

“You can’t be serious,” Kitara objected.

“We always answer distress calls,” Garcia said. “And besides, this is exactly what I was hoping for.”

“And what would that be?” Kitara asked.

“Fortune,” Garcia said. “Arriving with both hands full.”

Lt. Carrie McKnight swiveled to look at Captain Garcia. “I believe you’re misquoting that,” she said. “The Shakespearian quote is ‘fortune rarely comes with both hands full,’ if I’m not mistaken.”

“You’re not, but Shakespeare was a pessimist,” Garcia said. “How much longer does Gomez have on the installation process?”

“Nineteen hours,” Kitara said.

“At warp three, we’ll arrive at the Einstein coordinates in twelve hours,” Garcia said. “I want the Constitution’s warp core operational before we arrive.”

“That’s going to take some doing,” Kitara said, grimacing.

“Yes, but get it done, or our ruse is all for naught,” Garcia said.

“You can’t just throw more people at it,” Kitara argued. “At some point more becomes less effective because people will be tripping over each other.”

“I have faith in your ability to make it happen,” Garcia said. “In addition to that, I want you to make it look as if we’ve been living on the Constitution. A couple days of hard living, if you know what I mean.”

“Aye,” Kitara said. “But it will take thirteen hours to get the shields up to specs. Too many components have been scavenged from the system.”

“Do your best,” Garcia said.

“Aye,” Kitara said. “And, I’ll make sure the phaser banks are charged.”

“You suspect a trap, too, then?” Garcia asked.

“Of course,” Kitara said. “If you want I’ll stay on the Path Finder and cover your back while you execute the rescue operation.”

“No, I’ll want you on the Constitution with me,” Garcia said. “I can direct Losira from my implant and it’s not time to reveal our Ace. In fact, I’ll want all Federation Officer’s to have relocated to the Constitution in six hours, and take twenty Klingons, including Doctor Jurak to the Constitution. The remaining will stay on board Path Finder in case we need both ships. If we are unable to rescue people using just the Constitution’s transporter, I will use the Path Finder to expedite the rescue.”

“I understand. I best get to work,” Kitara said.

Satisfied that the work assignments were as good as done, Garcia activated his comm. Badge. “Lt. Gomez, are you in Engineering?”

“I was just on my way back to the Constitution,” Gomez answered. “The Klingons are having trouble connecting a power coupling, so I thought I’d go show them how. They don’t seem to have a concept of flash freezing the male end so that it contracts enough to fit it into the receptacle, where it will then expand as it returns to normal temperature to make a snug fit.”

"They'll have to do without your help," Garcia said. "I want warp power, with a field sufficient to include the Constitution. Effectively, I want to push her. I figure warp three is the best you can give me?"

"You're being a bit optimistic, don't you think?" Gomez complained.

"The USS Einstein is in trouble and may have only fourteen hours of emergency life support available," Garcia said, looking to Trini to confirm his guestimate. She nodded an affirmation. "The Path Finder is too small to be a life raft, but the Constitution would be just about right. I want us there in twelve hours, less if you can manage."

"I can give you warp one for sure," Gomez said, sighing. "I will try and give you more."

"No. I need more than try," Garcia said. "Transfer some power from the Path Finder into the Constitution's warp coils if you have to. Just make it happen."

"And I thought life on the Enterprise was stressful," Gomez said. "Aye. Captain."

"Bringing the Constitution's warp nacelles online might work," Lt. Undine said. "Shall I assist her?"

"Please," Garcia said. "Sendak, go with her please."

"Captain, we have warp one point five available at the helm," McKnight said.

"Let's do it," Garcia said.

McKnight engaged the warp drive and the two ships, the Constitution with the Path Finder in Piggy Back formation, jumped from space zero speed, relative to other flotsam in the junkyard, to warp one point five. McKnight allowed herself to breathe again and nodded to Garcia that everything was working within normal parameters.

"You have warp two available," Gomez called up to the Bridge.

"McKnight," Garcia said.

"Accelerating to warp two," McKnight said. "Warp two and holding."

Garcia proceeded to the science station and pulled up functional warp field maps. The Path Finder's four warp nacelles were glowing with radiated power. Without the Constitution, the Path Finder would be hauling ass at nearly warp nine point eight. Twelve minutes after Undine and Sendak had gone to assist Gomez, the Constitution's two warp nacelles began to glow. The warp field that surrounded the two ships grew, minimally, but it was sufficient to increase their speed.

"We have warp three point one available," McKnight whistled, appreciatively.

"Accelerate to three point one, then," Garcia ordered.

"Accelerating to three point one," McKnight affirmed. "Three point one achieved. Holding steady."

"Trini, hail the Einstein," Garcia said. "Broadcast on all frequencies just in case they only have one functioning channel. Let them know our ETA. Also, notify Star Fleet of the Einstein's predicament and their coordinates. Inform them that the USS New Constitution, under the command of Captain Garcia, is responding to the emergency. If they ask for more details, inform them that Admiral Singer will be happy to enlighten them."

Trini gave Garcia one of those looks that said, you know, I'll do it, but I don't think they're going to be receptive. Pressman, Singer's boss, was certainly going to be annoyed. At least, Garcia hoped so.

"Receiving a call from Quarter Master Klim," Trini said.

"On screen," Garcia said.

“We had a deal. You would not leave until the orders were verified,” Klim said.

“I know. I am breaking that deal in order to answer a distress call from the USS Einstein,” Garcia said. “I will make sure that you get an accommodation for facilitating the process of getting the Constitution operational, which directly assisted in the rescue operations.”

“That,” Klim thought about it further. “Would be nice, um, Captain Garcia. I hope your stay at Qualor Two was a pleasant one. God speed.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Garcia said. He cut the call, feeling a bit sorry for Klim, as he would certainly be getting some grief over the theft of the Constitution. There was little he could do about that, though. He called for Losira.

Losira materialized in front of him. She was outrageously dressed to get his attention, wearing the classic genie outfit. “Yes, Captain, my Captain.”

“Stop with the bad poetry,” Garcia said. He rubbed his forehead as if he had a headache. “As soon as Kitara’s team has the Constitution’s warp core up and running, most of the crew will be transferring over to the Constitution to keep up appearances. You’ll be taking over primary ship functions and will remain in full contact with me via my implant.”

“Sounds groovy,” Losira said, glancing down at her own implants. “I think everyone should have implants.”

“So do I,” Garcia said. “It would make it easier to send everyone secret messages and scripts to follow. However, it’s just you and me, honey...” And then it dawned on him what sort of implants she was speaking of as she glanced down at her chest and then return her gaze to him, flashing a smile. He frowned. “And, once again, you’re out of Uniform.”

“I could be, if you wish,” Losira said.

“Losira, if you are to continue being a functioning member of this crew, I expect you to comply with the same guidelines as the others do,” Garcia said.

“And which guidelines would that be?” Losira asked. “I’m not Klingon. I’m not human. What am I? I am the ship and without me, you can’t be. So, I think some leniency should be in order.”

Everyone on the Bridge found other work to occupy their attention. Losira was not a trained officer. She was a child. A very smart and dangerous child.

“Do you want to continue to have a working relationship with me,” Garcia said.

“I want a relationship with you,” Losira said.

“Then I expect compliance,” Garcia said. “Especially during office hours. Losira, this is serious. People’s lives are at stake and there’s the remote possibility that there may be a battle.”

“I understand the instructions and will respond accordingly to protect you and the others,” Losira said, seriously.

“No,” Garcia said. “Don’t act unless I tell you. Do you understand that? Even if I’m killed or incapacitated, in order to maintain the illusion that the Constitution is my primary ship, it’s necessary that you not act out of turn.”

“I understand. Call me if you need me,” Losira said. She stepped in really close to him and adjusted his jacket. “For anything.” She brought her hands over her head in a nomasta prayer gesture, rocked her head to and fro, and disappeared.

Garcia ignored the stares from McKnight and Trini.

“Tam, did you reprogram her?” Trini finally asked, unable to resist.

“No,” Garcia said. “Back to work. Chop chop.”

“Oh, yes,” Trini said, playfully. “Captain, my Captain.”

McKnight laughed.

“This is going to be a long twelve hours, I can tell,” Garcia said.

“You did ask for both hands full,” McKnight said.

It was Trini’s turn to laugh.

Garcia tapped his comm. badge again. “Rivan, will you come to my Ready Room, please.”

Garcia took the lift up and then sent it right back down. It didn’t take long for Rivan to arrive on the Bridgde. When she did, Trini directed her to the lift and showed her how to operate it. Rivan stepped up on the lift, moved the safety bar to the closed position, and it rose towards the Ready Room. The Ready Room was the forward most part of the ship, with a blister over head that allowed her to look up and out into the direction the Path Finder was traveling. With the Path Finder in the tandem position with the New Constitution, looking up not only revealed the stars passing by, broken down into their spectral patterns, but it offered a nice top view of the saucer section of the Constitution. In a way, seeing it in this fashion caused a bit of vertigo. Her mind wanted to conform to the “up” orientation she would expect from standing on the Saucer section. She gripped the bar on the lift a bit tighter than she needed to and forced herself not to stare up.

“I like your office,” Rivan said.

“Thank you,” Garcia said, getting up from his chair. He liked it, too. He had always liked the dome shape, probably because the Garcia family home was a dome. It reminded him of being in a cave. To one side of his desk, and closer to the wall, there was a couch, a coffee table, and two chairs. Garcia took Rivan’s hand and guided her to the couch. He took up a chair across from her. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Sure,” Rivan said. “Coffee?”

“Two coffees,” Garcia said, touching two points on his coffee table, indicating where he wanted the cups to appear. And two coffees appeared on the table.

“The omni directional replicator is really convenient,” Rivan said, picking up the closer of the two coffees. “I wonder how long it will be until everyone has one?”

“Probably not too long,” Garcia said. “Look, I called you up because...”

“We might go into battle and you’re worried for my well being,” Rivan said.

“You’re quick,” Garcia said.

“Do you sometimes mistake my naivety for stupidity?” Rivan asked. “I’ve learned a lot since you’re commune took me in. I managed to survive all on my own for over two months while you and the others were off on your training missions.”

Garcia thought about it. It was a fair question. “I don’t think you’re stupid. I just want you to be safe and I feel, perhaps incorrectly so, an overwhelming urge to protect you. You didn’t sign up for the dangers that seem to befall me. Anyway, why I called you: some of us are going over to the Constitution to play out a mission. I want to compel you to stay on the Path Finder. You’ll be safer here.”

“Command me to do so and I will,” Rivan said.

“I can’t command you. You’re not crew,” Garcia said.

“Make me a crewmember,” Rivan said. “God didn’t just send me to learn from you, God also sent me to serve. Only through service can you learn about joy and justice.”

“I will consider your request,” Garcia said. “Stay on the Path Finder.”

Garcia put a finger to her chin and encouraged her to rise. He drew her into his arms. She slipped her arms around his neck and they kissed. “I love you,” Rivan said.

“I know,” Garcia said. “Speaking of which, I need to ask you to stop hugging the Klingons.”

“But everyone needs to be hugged,” Rivan protested. “None more so than the Klingons.”

“It disturbs their sense of peace,” Garcia said.

“More likely it disturbs their socially constructed view of themselves as fierce warriors,” Rivan said.

Garcia smiled, surprised at her choice of words and her perception, a sign that she had been hanging around him too long, or perhaps reading his writings. The Klingons hated all things cute and would instantly destroy a Hello Kitty doll much less tolerate looking upon it. They also despised things of comfort and looked upon acts of kindness and affection with cynicism. Hugging, at least hugging the way Rivan did, was a threat to their masculinity and their warrior’s pride. No doubt the Klingon crew tolerated it to some degree because Rivan was considered the Captain’s woman. Still, many thought it was a direct challenge from the Captain himself, testing their mettle by her flaunting her freedom in front of their faces, while a few were simply looking out for her best interest. They wanted to prevent her from getting used to hugging Klingons. Hugging a Klingon crew member was one thing, but to do so to a random Klingon ‘in the wild’ or ‘on the street’ was to invite death, and they feared she simply didn’t understand what she was doing. This belief, that she was a simpleton and lacked understanding, was another reason she had not been sent to Sickbay with serious injuries.

“Kitara asked me to talk to you about it,” Garcia said. “Unsolicited contact of any form, whether it is someone hitting you or simply touching you, regardless of intent, is considered harassment. People must be given space to be and it’s already pretty tight on the elbow room as it is, so, please, as a personal favor to me, no hugging anyone.”

“Even Trini and Tatiana?” Rivan asked.

“You can hug them,” Garcia said, smiling. “Most of the humans would be receptive, but just ask.”

“And Doctor Misan?” Rivan asked. “I really like Doctor Misan. I’ve never met an Andorian before.”

“You can hug Doctor Misan,” Garcia said. “Again, best rule of thumb, ask.”

“And can I hug you?” Rivan asked, mischievously, since she already knew the answer, still in his arms

Garcia squeezed her tightly. “Any time,” he said.

They were interrupted by a call over Garcia’s Comm. Badge.

“Captain Garcia, please report to Sickbay,” Doctor Jurak said.

“Sorry, Rivan, business calls,” Garcia said, and then he opened his side of the communication. “I’ll be right there.”

Rivan took Garcia’s hand and they both went to the lift together. As it descended, Rivan let go of his hand and put a professional distance between them. From there, they

both shared a turbo-lift down to deck six, where Garcia got off and she continued down to Deck seven and Garcia's quarters. It was just a short walk from the lift to Sickbay, where the Doctor greeted him.

"Thank you," Doctor Jurak said.

"No problem," Garcia said. "What's up?"

"You are," Doctor Jurak said. "Hop up on the table."

"Excuse me?" Garcia asked.

"Everyone has had their physical but you," Doctor Jurak said. "Your turn."

"I don't have time for this," Garcia said and started to walk away.

"We have over eleven hours before we rendezvous with the Einstein," Jurak said.

"I think you can give me the forty five minutes it will take to get a base line in order to gauge changes through time. Now, I don't know the protocols that Star Fleet uses for getting compliance with medical directives, but I have the authority to restrain you if need be. In fact, I have your signature affirming my authority to restrain non-compliant ship personnel, which includes you."

"You wouldn't dare," Garcia said.

Jurak bared his teeth and growled. "Try me," he said.

Garcia took in a deep breath, regretted doing so because Klingon breath was not 'pretty' human breath, and hopped up on the table. "You have forty five minutes."

Jurak nodded and instructed the table to begin a series of scans with the tap of a few buttons, while he did still more scans using his medical tricorder. "Great resting heart rate. More impressive is the high coherence between pulmonary and respiratory functions," Jurak observed out loud.

"You can thank biofeedback and meditation for that," Garcia said. "And learning how to breathe correctly."

"Your temperature is extremely high for a human," Jurak said. "Consistent with your files, but odd."

"I am three quarters human, one quarter Vulcan," Garcia said.

"Still, you shouldn't run so hot," Jurak said. "It's a curiosity."

"Would you prefer it lowered? I can adjust it," Garcia said.

"Truly?" Jurak asked. "Your biofeedback and meditation practices have given you that much control of both your sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems?"

"Perfect control," Garcia said.

"If you'll close your eyes, I would like to get some readings of your brain waves with eyes closed, to better complete your brain map," Jurak said. He whistled. "You know, if it wasn't for your temperature, I would say that you are the perfect physical specimen. Text book perfect. I have never seen brain waves so perfectly balanced."

"Believe me, it took some practice," Garcia said.

Jurak asked for an explanation.

"If you do a complete medical history, you will see that my theta brain waves use to be dominant, indicative of someone with hyper attention deficit disorder. I learned to control it through the use of neural-feedback programs and extensive meditative trainings," Garcia complained, opening his eyes again. "I can demonstrate by increasing alpha, beta, or even the SMR brain waves at will. I can even temporarily over-clock the beta waves to improve cognitive and physical performances in an emergency."

"I would really like a demonstration of this when you have more free time," Jurak said. "It is very rare to have a patient with such control under a microscope. Would you agree to a more intensive study for my personal research?"

"Yes," Garcia said. "What next? Stair climber?"

"Hold on a sec," Jurak said, studying something interesting. "Doctor Misan, will you come here a moment."

The Andorian Star Fleet medical officer, who was preparing a medical kit, put down what he was doing and came over to examine Doctor Jurak's findings.

"Have you double checked the instrument?" Doctor Misan asked.

"I did," Jurak said.

"That doesn't make any sense," Misan said. "This parasite is species specific."

"I know, humans should be immune," Jurak said. "I wonder if his unusual body temperature is a factor."

"Excuse me," Garcia said. "I am a medical professional and I would appreciate it if you didn't talk about me as if I weren't present."

"Losira, report," Misan said. "Confirm diagnosis."

As Losira materialized, Doctor Jurak hailed Lt. Commander Kitara and Lt. Commander Undine on his personal Comm. Badge. "Kitara and Undine, report to the Path Finder's Sickbay, immediately."

"I'm rather busy at the moment, Doctor," Kitara said.

"Now!" Jurak snapped. "STS."

Site to Site transport meant an emergency she couldn't ignore. She was beaming in almost simultaneously with Garcia's mental companions, no doubt aroused by his growing anxiety. "What's going on?" Duana asked, but he ignored her. She would learn when he did.

Undine entered via the main door. She entered in time to hear Losira confirm the Doctor's diagnosis.

"What do you want?" Kitara said.

"Garcia has a KTO parasite," Jurak said.

Kitara stood, stoic for all of about two seconds, and then burst into laughter.

"Hello?" Garcia said. "I'd like some info please."

"That can't be," Kitara argued, trying to restrain her laughter.

"I'm not joking," Jurak said.

"He's not," Misan and Losira said together.

Kitara laughed so hard her chest hurt. "What stage?"

"Third stage," Jurak said.

Kitara stopped laughing. "How long does he have?"

"He could have an hour or two weeks," Jurak said. "It's impossible to tell without a dissection."

"Whoa, hold it," Garcia said. "What are you guys talking about?"

"You have a KTO parasite inside you," Jurak said.

"I don't have a parasite inside me," Garcia argued. "I've been up and down and through Star Fleet transporters a dozen times in the last week alone and the transporters would have alerted the transporter operators of any sort of infection."

“A transporter will only screen for infectious substances that it is programmed to recognize,” Misan said. “Humans are not susceptible to this parasite, so they do not screen for it.”

“How would I get this parasite?” Garcia asked.

“There’s only two ways to acquire it,” Doctor Jurak said. “The first way is eating the raw heart of an infected, wild Targ.”

“We’ve been through this. I’m a devoted vegetarian,” Garcia said. “I guarantee you I have not killed any Targs or eaten any meats that have not been replicated.”

Kitara burst out laughing again.

“I’m glad you’re so amused,” Garcia said.

“The only other way of contracting this parasite is through sexual intercourse with an infected partner,” Jurak said.

Garcia blinked. They were all looking at him for confirmation. “Three months, two weeks, three days, and seven hours ago, roughly,” Garcia admitted, assuming his only romantic encounter with a Klingon was the source of his infection.

“Hence stage three progression,” Misan said.

“Stage three?” Garcia asked.

“Stage three is the most volatile stage of the organism. It could kill you at any moment and seek out a new host. It prefers female hosts. Male hormones tend to make it aggressive,” Jurak said.

“So, you’re saying my friend is probably dead?” Garcia asked.

“No,” Kitara said. “Female hormones prevent the parasite from ever reaching stage three.”

“Still, we need to contact her to request she get treated before she mates with anyone else,” Misan said.

“Of course, if she is only sleeping with humans, we don’t have to worry,” Kitara said.

“I told you sleeping around was dangerous,” Ilona said, popping Garcia on the back of the head. “You forget you share this body with us.”

“So, humans are immune,” Garcia said. “Which means Rivan is probably okay since her genome is almost identical to humans?”

“Rivan is clean,” Jurak said. “My tricorder is programmed to find this particular parasite.”

“Okay, so how do we get rid of it before it kills me?” Garcia asked.

“I have to kill you,” Jurak said.

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked.

“In order to expedite the parasite’s departure from your body, we will need to stop your pulmonary and respiratory functions, flash cool your body to nearly freezing, in a freezing environment, and then provide the parasite an alternative heat source,” Jurak explained. “Its preference is to have a live Targ, but an artificial heat source will suffice. Once it has completely withdrawn itself from your body, we can kill it without any repercussions to you.”

“So, you’re telling me I have a parasite in me that could kill me at any moment,” Garcia said. “And the only way to get it out of me is to kill me.”

“Yes,” Jurak said. “You’ve passed the hearing part of your physical.”

“Can’t you use a transporter?” Garcia asked.

"No," Losira said. "This particular parasite incorporates your DNA and your cells into its biology, to better protect itself from your own body defenses, as well as using your own resistance to microbiological organisms for its own protection. The transporter will not be able to distinguish between you and the parasite. We only know that you are infected and it is at stage three."

"How will this go down?" Garcia asked.

"We'll strip you of all clothing, put you on a gurney, roll you into a cold room, I'll administer a drug that will stop your heart, we'll flash cool you to nearly freezing, wait for the parasite to vacate your body, kill it, and then finally resuscitate you. The whole procedure could take anywhere from five to thirty minutes, depending on how willing the parasite is to give you up as a host."

"Recovery time?" Garcia said.

"Two to three hours, minimum," Jurak said.

"He's not a Klingon," Doctor Misan protested. "He'll need a good three to four days before he starts to feel optimum."

"I don't have three or four days," Garcia said.

"I will not pamper you, then," Jurak said. "You should be back up to normal before we reach the Einstein, provided we act on this quickly."

"And if I refuse to go through with the procedure?" Garcia asked.

"Then I will be forced to quarantine you," Kitara said. "If it kills you and goes in search of a new host, it would put the crew at risk."

"I promise you, Captain, I will bring you back to life," Doctor Jurak said.

"You've done this before?" Garcia asked.

"Not on a human," Doctor Jurak said, honest enough about that.

"Get prepped," Garcia said. "Losira, put a call into Vulcan, priority one. I want to speak with Simone. Garcia to Lt. Sookanan, please report to Sickbay."

"You'll be fine," Kitara said.

"What about us?" Ilona asked.

Garcia rubbed his forehead. Losira stepped forward. "I have Simone on a priority channel. She has holographic capabilities. Would you like?"

"Please," Garcia said.

A hologram of Simone appeared. She was wearing a causal Vulcan dress, as if she were about to spend the day at the library. She did not smile, but it was clear she recognized Garcia. Her hand went up in the typical Vulcan greeting. "Tam, parted from me, never parted. What troubles you?"

"Simone, parted from me, never parted. How do you know something troubles me?" Garcia asked.

"Because you have never called me before," Simone said.

"Point taken," Garcia said.

"That and I have heard rumors about you," Simone said.

"I will confirm or deny such later," Garcia said. Trini stepped in the room and he waved her to wait a moment. "And I will try to do better in the future about calling, but right now, this takes priority. I have to undergo a medical procedure. The process requires my pulmonary and respiratory functions to be temporarily impaired."

Trini gasped.

The hologram of Simone stepped forward and the image of her grew large and her feet disappeared as if she had stepped closer to a camera which was no longer focused in such a way as to capture all of her. She reached out to him but her hand passed through him. "Is this compulsory?"

"I'm afraid so," Garcia said. "The condition is terminal without the procedure, and could endanger others."

"I see," Simone said.

"I just wanted you to know so you could prepare yourself," Garcia said. "I understand that the last time I died, when I drowned on Iotia, you experienced some discomfort. Perhaps you can meditate and reduce the affects?"

"I will begin meditating immediately," Simone said. "When will you undergo the procedure?"

"Ten minutes," Doctor Jurak said.

Garcia looked to the holographic Simone.

"I heard," Simone said.

"Also, you need to have a medical check up. Specifically, the Doctors need to scan you for a KTO parasite. You probably don't have it, but for precautionary measures, its best to get checked out. I am sorry I keep causing you pain," Garcia said.

Simone nodded. "Come back to me," she said, and then ended the conversation. Her image disappeared.

"They're going to kill you?" Trini asked. "Doesn't this sound particularly psychotic to anyone?"

"It must be done," Kitara assured her.

"Trini, I need you to send some information, discreetly, to the following people, apprising them of my condition," Garcia said. "The chances are that they have not been infected, but they need to know. Counselor Troi, Doctor Selar, and Lt. Robinson on board the Enterprise. Arlene Barton, Star Fleet command. Arly Zen and Jaxa Sito, at Star Fleet Academy. Contact the USS Herald which will be arriving at Iotia in a couple of weeks and ask them to check in on Susana Hoffs, Roxanne Dawson, Dana Scully, Lt. Col. Sarah MacKenzie, Martha Quinn and that flight attendant, Donna, what's her name. Contact the Pa Nun, and inform N'elent that she is probably the source of my infection and needs to be checked out.

"Anyone else?" Trini asked. She seemed upset.

"I think that's everyone," Garcia said.

"Well, guess what, I didn't bring a pen," Trini said.

"I recorded all the information," Losira said. "It's transferred to your station. I could go ahead and draft the appropriate letters."

"We're ready to proceed when you are," Doctor Jurak said.

"Let's get it over with," Garcia said. "Undine, if I don't recover, make sure everyone knows that my wishes are that you follow Kitara's orders as if they were from me. She fights with honor."

"You better recover," Trini said.

"Please remove your clothing," Jurak instructed Garcia. "When you're done, go into surgery room two and lie down on the gurney. Everyone but Doctor Misan needs to leave Sickbay. Now."

Garcia ignored Ilona's tirade as he complied with Doctor Jurak's orders and undressed. Lal required some counseling, so Troi led her away, trying to reassure her that Garcia would be fine. Doctor Jurak placed a neural monitor and stimulator against Garcia's temple. He also stuck another monitor on his chest.

"Good luck, Captain," Kitara said.

"Shouldn't you be wishing the Doctor that?" Garcia asked, folding his clothes before setting them on the bed he had been on.

"I told you, he's a good doctor," Kitara said. "The best in the Empire."

"Come on, come on," Jurak ushered her out.

Garcia entered the surgery room, climbed up on the gurney and laid down. Things were happening so fast that he really hadn't taken time to be afraid for his life and all. Perhaps if he had a day or so to think about it, he might be more appropriately scared. As he laid on the cold gurney and assessed his feelings, all he could come up with was annoyance at the inconvenience of it all. Jurak entered, wearing a special bio suit. He popped a medicine cartridge into a delivery gun, put the gun to Garcia's neck.

"Don't worry," Jurak said. "You won't feel a thing."

Jurak injected him.

"Ouch," Garcia complained. And then he was gone.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Garcia found himself surrounded by white light. Had it been black and space, he would have understood things better. Nothingness should be black, he decided, but here nothing was white and empty and pressing in on him from all directions. Surprisingly, there was no pain, as might be associated with intense sunlight. He also knew that he had been here before. Something of a shadow, but almost as white as the surroundings, was approaching him and the closer it got the more it began to resemble human form. When it was upon him, it was indeed human, a female, and she grasped his hands almost too enthusiastically.

"Tammias Parkin Arblaster Garcia," she said, spitting it out quickly but clearly enunciating every syllable. "You're dead."

"Do I know you?" Garcia asked. After having asked it, he began to review the question and decided it didn't make sense. There were a dozen other questions that he could have asked, arguments he could have made against him being dead, since obviously he did not feel dead, and though there was the illusion of eternity about him, the floor certainly felt solid beneath his feet. He had a sense of up and down, which in itself was an illusion, but a solid enough illusion to give him a sense of order. The fact that she had grasped his hand and spoke to him suggested a flow of time because without time there could be no experience of sound. Or light for that matter. No tactile sensations.

"We've never met, in person, if that's what you mean," she said. "But I was a big fan of yours, technically still am, not that that is important. All that is important is that we're going to have a great working relationship, I can just tell. I know all about these kinds of things. At least now I do, anyway."

"Who are you?" Garcia asked.

"I'm Q," she said, tightening the grip on his hand as if to prevent him from drawing back in alarm.

Garcia blinked. "My understanding was you are male," Garcia said.

"Oh, you mean Q. Specifically, Picard's Q, unless you mean Janeway's Q, but no, that hasn't happened yet. I mean, it has happened, or will happen, but you're not privy to that, so just forget it," she said, nodding, and taking a breath in before continuing. "Couple things on that. Q is not limited to gender roles and can alter how Q is perceived by others. Typically, though, once Q has manifested Q's presence to a specific entity, Q tends to be consistent with the chosen form as to avoid confusion. I am Q, we are Q, and I have my own idiosyncrasies, but also, like you, I am a mixture of species. I was human, am human, female, with Q abilities. It's all very complicated, but not really important. More a distraction, a tangent away from why I am really here."

"Why are you really here?" Garcia asked, speaking slowly in order to try and force her to slow down, but also to be very clear in conveying his question.

"I've been assigned to you," she said.

"To what ends?" Garcia asked.

"Yours, of course," Q said. "And the Universe as you know it. Why you want to try and keep it the same is beyond me, but small steps, Q keeps telling me. Small steps."

"Q?" Garcia asked.

"Sorry, Picard's Q. He's my advocate," Q said. "My human name is Amanda, but you really don't need to know that because technically you're in my before time, when I still thought I was human, and you shouldn't really have any encounters with me

in the before time, before I became aware of my Qness, because of temporal anomalies and such, and it just complicates things. For you, not me, I think it's actually fun, unwinding paradoxes and looking for chickens or eggs to see which came first."

Garcia pulled his hand free from hers. "Do you always talk this fast?"

"Am I talking too fast?" Amanda Q asked. "Maybe, yeah, okay, well, I'll try and slow down. It's just so exciting that you are my first assignment and all and I am perhaps a bit nervous. I mean, I did have crush on you in the before time, the time before I awoke, and on Riker, he is so tall, but a bit stubborn if you ask me, and wasting so much of his time when everyone in the Universe, it seems, knows he and Troi should get together. I am partial to a Worf Troi hook up myself, which actually happens you know, but not in your intended time line. That's a parallel tangent. I'm sorry. Am I babbling?"

"Is there anyone else I can speak with?" Garcia asked.

Amanda Q laughed, took him by the arm, and then snapped her fingers. Suddenly they were on a planet, on a hill top over looking a valley. It could have been anywhere, a half a dozen or so planets that Garcia had actually visited, but it was somewhere specific.

"Welcome to Earth," Amanda said. "Earth past. See the dinosaurs? Aren't they cute? Yes, you're so cute, little dinosaurs. Just got to love the raptors. So much smarter than the most primitive of primates that evolve on this planet. I do say, they may have had a good shot for the sentience thing had you not come along. You as in humans you. And you as in you, Garcia, you. But I'm getting ahead of myself again."

"Um, there is this book, I think by Asimov that suggested that traveling to the past is inherently unsafe," Garcia said. "Just stepping on a single ant or butterfly could wipe out an entire genetic line that could snow ball into the future meaning we get back and there is no humanity."

"Yeah, wasn't that a great book?" Amanda said. "It was required reading when I was in elementary. But now that I actually can travel through time, I see some of erroneous concepts and how naïve the writer was."

"Do you always bring your assignments to the past?" Garcia asked.

"At least I didn't take you as far back as Picard's Q took Picard, or will take him. It has happened, but it hasn't, you know? So many beginnings and so many more endings, but all good things must come to an end," Amanda Q said. "Why are we talking about Picard again? Do you like have an obsession with Picard? I thought you were a Kirk fan."

Garcia closed his eyes and tried to will himself to wake up. "There's got to be something wrong here," Garcia thought.

"I was wondering when you would notice," Amanda Q said.

Garcia opened his eyes and stared at Q. She casually nodded her head in a direction as if to give him a clue. Finally, frustrated, she pointed. Garcia looked. That's when he saw the reptilian humanoids.

"Gorn!" Garcia said. "I thought you said this was Earth."

"It is," Amanda Q said.

"But they shouldn't be there, here," Garcia said, confused.

"Neither should you," Amanda Q said.

"You brought me here," Garcia said.

Amanda snapped her fingers and they were suddenly elsewhere, but probably still on the same planet. They were inside a Gorn village, next to a huge monument that

looked very familiar. Garcia, another Garcia was firing what appeared to be a machine gun at a reptilian species that was not Gorn. He saw Afu, injured, being pulled into the artifact by a woman. After Afu was safely inside, the other Garcia retreated into the artifact and the artifact closed. A beam from the artifact lanced heavenwards. Q snapped her fingers and they were instantly transported into orbit, floating in a bubble of air. The beam from the artifact shot past them, bathing a nearby asteroid in blue light. The asteroid changed direction and was dragged down towards the Earth.

"You know what that structure was, don't you?" Amanda asked.

"It looked like the preserver artifact from Miramee's world," Garcia said.

"You're so sharp," Amanda Q said, delighted, hugging him. "It's such a joy not having to work with a moron for my first assignment. And you know what that artifact's function was, right?"

"It deflected asteroids," Garcia said. The asteroid was glowing as it fell deeper into the atmosphere. "But that appears to be a tractor beam."

Amanda smiled at him. He just dumbly stared back.

"You know what that means then, right?" Amanda Q said.

"You're saying I am the reason dinosaurs are now extinct?" Garcia asked.

Amanda Q screamed and hugged him and kissed him. "You did it!"

"I didn't do it!" Garcia said.

"You just saw yourself and you know the dinosaurs were wiped out by an asteroid striking the Earth," Amanda Q said. "And, of course, it was a good thing, from the human perspective, other wise there would be no human race. There would be Gorn or Voth or raptors. Did I tell you I was partial to the raptors. Um, I wonder if they are related to the Gorn some how. At any rate, there would be no humans because the rodents you evolved from wouldn't have developed past the snack phase. Brings new meaning to the term of mice and men, doesn't it?"

"Voth?" Garcia asked.

"Oh, you haven't met them yet," Amanda Q said. "Forgive me, I am new at this, you know. Those were the other Reptillians. The ones that were firing at you in an attempt to prevent you from getting into the artifact."

"What are you saying to me? I am going to become responsible for the extinction of the dinosaurs?" Garcia asked.

"No, you already did that, done deal, over with, that's the past, time for you to move forwards," Amanda Q said.

"Then why are you showing me this?" Garcia asked.

Amanda chuckled. "The Gorn tend to have long memories. Just thought you would want to know why the Gorn are going to try and kill you."

"I don't know any Gorn," Garcia said.

"You will," Amanda Q said, and kissed him. "Thank you for such a lovely time. I'll be seeing you."

Amanda Q snapped her fingers and was gone. The asteroid struck, sending a plume of earth, plasma, and debris skywards, an expanding pillar of death that grew a quarter of the globe before its fierceness began to subside. Garcia felt sick to his stomach.



"Tam? Tam, you need to start waking up now."

Garcia recognized the voice, but found it hard to comply. "Are we there yet?"

"No, but you need to get up."

"Why is the sky black?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

They let him sleep for a few more minutes, but when Jurak said enough was enough, he proved himself not to be as gentle as Rivan, Misan, and the nurse had been. He forced Garcia to a sitting position.

"Hey!" Jurak snapped. "Are you going to lie around here all day? Get up, soldier. Now!"

Garcia squinted but managed to open his eyes.

"You're not as cute as the other one," Garcia said.

Jurak jerked him off the bed and started walking him. Rivan held Ambassador Clemmons up to Garcia, hoping the cat would help bring him around to normal.

"Please," Garcia whimpered. "Just let me be. Let me die."

"Tam, we need you," Rivan protested, horrified by his statement.

"I've never seen him so despondent," Trini said.

"It's the drugs talking," Kitara said. "They'll wear off shortly."

"Captain, I want you to walk on your own power now," Jurak said.

"Walk the dinosaur," Garcia said. "Can't bring them back."

"Tam, you're talking nonsense," Rivan said.

"Rivan?" Garcia asked.

"Yes," Rivan said. "It's me. No, don't stop walking."

"I want to lay down," Garcia protested.

"No," Jurak said. "Keep moving."

"Why is the floor moving?" Garcia asked.

"You're on a treadmill," Jurak said. "Now, hold yourself up."

"Treadmill? Did I kill the hamsters, too?" Garcia asked.

"If this wasn't so sad it would be funny," Trini said.

"Come on," Jurak insisted. "Stand up straight."

Jurak sprayed cold water on Garcia's face.

"Tread carefully," Garcia warned. "I am the destroyer of worlds."

"Better," Jurak chuckled. "Let's hear some fight."

"You keep spraying me with water and I'm going to kick your butt," Garcia said.

"What's your name?" Jurak asked.

"Tammas," Garcia answered. He was now aware that when he stopped walking the treadmill carried him back, forcing him to walk again.

"Full name and rank?" Jurak insisted.

"Tammas Parkin Arblaster Garcia, Captain," Garcia said.

Garcia stepped off the treadmill and slowly relinquished his grip on the rails.

"Did I tell you to stop?" Jurak said.

"That will be enough, Doctor," Garcia said. "I'm lucid."

Rivan hugged him. He hugged her back, trying not to surrender again, but it was so hard not leaning on her. Clemmons cried out for being squashed between them, and he eased up on Rivan and petted the cat. Trini came and touched his arm. "You okay?"

"I don't know," Garcia said, and looked to Jurak. "How did we do?"

"I changed my mind and left it in you," Jurak said.

"Excuse me?" Garcia said, angered.

"Relax," Jurak said, chuckling at his own sense of humor. "We got it. All of it. You're free."

"Thank you," Garcia said. "Can I see it?"

"It was disposed of," Jurak said.

A hint of paranoia started to rise in Garcia, but he pushed it down. He couldn't allow himself to buy into conspiracies. He had to trust that everything was as it appeared. Perhaps it was the drugs in his system making him cynical.

"May I leave?" Garcia asked.

"If you want," Jurak said. "Wear this medical bracelet so I can monitor you remotely."

Garcia slipped the bracelet onto his right wrist. He turned to his first officer. "How long till we arrive?"

"Four hours," Kitara said.

"Four hours?" Garcia asked. "I thought I was only going to be asleep for a couple hours. Were there complications?"

"No, you just needed to sleep," Kitara said.

Garcia nodded. "Fine. I'll be in my ready room if anyone needs me."

"May I go with you?" Rivan asked.

Garcia consented. She followed him back to his Ready Room where he sat down on the couch. Rivan set Clemmons down and he explored the Ready Room before making himself comfortable in Garcia's chair.

"Computer, tomato soup and grilled cheese," Rivan said, indicating a spot on the coffee table in front of Garcia. "Maybe this will help?"

He smiled faintly at her.

"Thank you, Rivan," Garcia said.

Rivan sat by him, touched his face and kissed him. "It is my pleasure to serve you," Rivan said. "Every day is a blessing and serving is the most important thing I can do. And this is such a small thing, compared to my love for you," she said. She lifted a bite of sandwich and brought it to his mouth. He took it from her hand and attempted to feed himself. He dipped the grilled cheese in the soup and ate it. After only a half of sandwich, he reclined back into the couch and slowly slumped over onto Rivan's shoulders.

"I'm so tired," Garcia said.

"I know, but I think you're supposed to stay awake," Rivan said.

He nodded, even agreed with her, but he sunk until his head was in her lap and his eyes closed. Rivan held him close to her and let him sleep.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Gorn vessel Sssrl had been waiting a long time in the dark. Waiting with only minimum life support active. Most of the Gorn on the ship had settled down and were conserving their own energy, becoming more and more lethargic as the cold set in. The First Officer saw something on his monitor and got up. He spoke, the first words in perhaps a day, to his Captain.

"It is just as you predicted, Captain. The prey has arrived and will be moving into firing range."

"I see. Hold your fire."

The Gorn held his position, ready to reign furry down upon the unsuspecting Star Fleet vessel. Though the solar system was not technically theirs, since there was really no property here worth claiming, it was still close enough to their space to make a case for defending their territory. Like a crocodile, hiding just below the surface, the ship floated lifelessly amidst the planetary debris that surrounded the only planet with an atmosphere, waiting for the prey to come into range. The debris field consisted of rocks of varying sizes that had spread out into a halo around the planet, suggesting that there had once been a moon orbiting this planet. Perhaps it had been struck by an asteroid. The Federation ship entered orbit on a path that would take them right in front of their ship, passing above the halo of debris. They couldn't have asked for better luck.

"Captain, they just turned on an emergency locator beacon and their shields are going up."

"Fire!" the Captain yelled.

Plasma energy leapt from their ship like lightening intercepting the target and the growing shields. The shields flickered and went off and the Federation ship began to glow as the plasma energy enveloped it. When the glow died, the Einstein was completely dead in space, continuing forward on its momentum.

"Grl, take a boarding party over. Find McCoy and the Grays. Bring them back alive," the Gorn Captain said. "Quickly. In case their signal got out."

Grl bowed and issued his commands in the hissing clicking way of his speech patterns. His fellow hunters fell into their place and they followed him to the transporter room. It would not be easy finding the ones they searched for, but they would have several advantages. The Gorn could see in the dark due to infra red vision. The other advantage was that the humans were no match for the Gorn unarmed, and their electromatic plasma pulse weapon should have disabled every piece of electronic equipment on board. The humans would be completely in the dark, no doubt too preoccupied getting minimum life support systems back up and running to worry about a few Gorn intruders.

The Gorn transported over to the Einstein and began their search. They were slow, but they were methodical. They ignored the humans they encountered for the most part, but every now and then it was necessary to kill one. As they maneuvered, slow, meticulous, and wheezing slightly, down a certain corridor, they came upon a room that was guarded, which Grl took as a sign. He was right. After killing the guards, they entered the room and found McCoy and three Gray drones. One of his men secured McCoy in a bear hug and ordered him not to move. The others began chasing the Gray drones around in futile and almost comical attempt to capture them.

“Use your weapons. Stun them,” Grl said. “I will check the next room for the queen.”

He opened the inner door to enter and inspect the room. He didn’t get a chance. From seemingly nowhere a Royal Bengal tiger leapt up at him and took him down. A regular tiger and a Gorn might have been evenly matched, but this was no regular tiger. One of the hunters took a shot at the tiger and was surprised to find that the Tiger had a personal shield that blocked his phaser blast.

“Retreat,” Grl ordered. “Take McCoy back to the ship.”

Grl fought off the tiger and managed to retreat drawing a dagger as he did so. The tiger growled, its ears flat and its tail whipping with annoyance. They were at an obvious impasse. Grl beamed back to his ship just moments after his men had retreated, badly hurt, but alive.

♪♪▶

“A tiger?” the Captain demanded.

“I’ll go back,” Grl said. “I’ll take a more efficient weapon.”

“No,” the Captain said. “The humans will no doubt be more prepared for us this time and I don’t want them all dead, yet. I need someone there for Garcia to rescue.”

“How can you be so sure that Garcia will come?” Grl said.

“The Oracle has never failed me,” the Captain said. “It was right about McCoy helping the Grays, wasn’t it? I want you to take the shuttle and deliver McCoy to Cestus Three. Wait there until I return.”

“And if you don’t return?” Grl said.

“Then use McCoy to draw Garcia into the trap,” the Captain said. “He will come for McCoy. And when he does, we will have our vengeance.”

Grl departed, chuckling in agreement at his commander’s deviousness. Garcia, the destroyer of worlds, will finally pay for his crimes against the Gorn Hegeomony.

♪♪▶

“Anything?” Garcia asked. He sipped his coffee.

“No response to our hails,” Trini answered.

“Nothing unusual on sensors,” Kitara said. “What were they doing in this system? It’s non inhabitable. There are no uncommon resources.”

“I’m detecting life signs,” Sendak said.

“We made it in time, then,” Trini said.

“Lt Undine,” Garcia said. “Report to transporter room four.”

“Maybe I should take an Away Team over,” Kitara said. “Find their Captain and find out what happened. Doctor Jurak should go, too.”

“Hold on that. Have Doctor Jurak standing by to receive casualties, though,” Garcia said. “McKnight, bring us out of warp and close to within one hundred meters of the Einstein.”

“Captain, I have established contact with the Einstein’s Captain,” Trini said. “Voice only.”

“On speaker,” Garcia said.

“This is Captain Henson of the USS Einstein. To whom am I speaking?”

“This is Captain Garcia of the USS New Constitution,” Garcia answered. “I am responding to your emergency distress beacon.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe you, but I have not heard of a Captain Garcia, and if my memory serves, the Constitution is no longer in service,” Captain Henson said.

“I’ll be happy to explain, but let’s do this by the book,” Garcia said. “First, let’s proceed with the evacuation of your ship. Do you have any casualties?”

“A few,” Captain Henson said. “But I want to meet you first. Lock onto my com. Badge and beam me over.”

“As you wish,” Captain Garcia said. “Lt Undine, beam Captain Henson directly to the Bridge.”

A moment later, Captain Henson was on the Bridge of the USS New Constitution. He seemed a little relieved to find that Garcia was actually human. Then he saw the Klingons.

“Can you tell us who attacked you?” Kitara asked.

“Who are you people?” Henson asked.

“I’m Captain Garcia and that’s my First Officer, Kitara,” Garcia said. “We were on a secret mission to restore the Constitution to operating status when we received your distress signal. Here’s the deal: My ship is not fully operational. I only have one transporter online, so the faster we start transferring your crew the better. In fact, if you send over some of your engineers, maybe we can get a couple more transporters online to expedite the process.”

“You stole a Starship!?” Henson said.

Garcia sighed. “Technically, yes. Once we get out of this system, you can contact Star Fleet Command and verify my story with Admiral Singer. Now, do you want to be rescued or not. Because, quite frankly, I have work to do and your reaction to my presence here is not exactly as gratuitous as I had imagined it would be.”

“I’m sorry,” Henson said. “But I was on a secret mission of my own when we were attacked. Your arrival here seems more than coincidental.”

“Well, I’m sorry. I’m not exactly sure who you expected to rescue you, but I suspect I’m going to have to do. Let’s save your crew and get them to the nearest Starbase,” Garcia said. “We can figure out the rest later.”

“Can I speak to you alone?” Henson asked.

“Can I start transporting people?” Garcia asked.

“Yes, please,” Henson said, activating his com badge. “Number one, coordinate with the Constitution on getting our crew transferred over. Injured first, and then get some Engineers over here and get them to work on the transporter systems.”

“Aye,” Einstein’s first officer said.

Garcia led Captain Henson to the Constitution’s Ready room. Trini had taken liberty of bringing some of Garcia’s stuff over to give it the appearance that he had been using it. And since the replicators were off line, she also had set up a coffee pot and a tray of condiments. Garcia made a mental note to thank her later and asked Henson if he would like a cup of coffee. The man looked cold, even with his jacket zipped up tight, and he accepted the offer graciously. He held it to absorb the heat from the mug into his hands.

“You’re welcome,” Garcia said. “Sorry I am unable to offer you more luxuries. I barely had the engines up in time to respond to your distress call.”

“That’s the odd thing,” Henson said. “I didn’t send out a distress call.”

The ship rocked, forcing Garica and Henson to grab for support. Henson spilled his coffee. The red alert klaxons began blaring and Garcia went immediately to the Bridge.

"It's a Gorn ship," Kitara said. "Their first strike missed us. Rescue operation suspended. I have partial shields, but they won't tolerate too many hits from that energy weapon."

Translation, the shot that should have taken out the New Constitution was absorbed by the Path Finder's shields, giving the New Constitution time to raise their shields and take evasive action. Garcia took his chair, assessing the visual information on the screen.

"Prepare to return fire," Garcia ordered, removing a stick of gum from his sleeve. He popped it into his mouth and put the foil in his jacket pocket.

"No, you can't do that," Henson said, grabbing Garcia's chair for support as the ship was rocked a second time.

"They're coming around for another strike," Kitara said.

"McKnight, take us through the planetary ring, no deflectors," Garcia said. "That should dissipate some of that energy from that weapon of theirs. Captain, unless you have a very good reason for me not returning fire, you better give it to me now."

"They kidnapped Admiral McCoy," Henson said. "I can't risk you destroying their ship and killing him."

"Hail them," Garcia said, debating if he should log onto to his Kelvan computer. He decided he didn't have enough energy to resist the damage he could do.

"This is Captain Garcia of the USS New Constitution," Garcia said. "Cease your hostilities and allow us to continue with the rescue operation."

A Gorn actually answered. "You are the destroyer of worlds. You and your crew will be eliminated."

"McKnight, keep the debris ring between us," Garcia said. He logged onto the Path Finder via his implant and struck up a conversation with Losira. (Get on their ship and disable their shields. Keep me apprised of your progress.)

(On it.) Losira said.

"It is turning back on the Einstein," Kitara said.

"Damn it," Garcia cursed. "Turn us about, put us on a collision course, phasers at ready and standby."

Henson grabbed Garcia's arm. "Belay that!"

"McCoy is one man. I will not sacrifice your crew to a bunch of overgrown lizards just to save McCoy and he would have it no other way, now unless you have some tactical advice, step back," Garcia snapped.

"They're coming back around," Kitara said.

"Stand by," Garcia said, standing up right behind McKnight, holding onto the back of her chair. "I want the starboard side of the saucer section to graze their shield, push through it if you can. Everyone, brace for impact. Kitara, in three, two, one, now!"

The Gorn ship turned to avoid a potential collision, but McKnight fired port thrusters, turning the ship and forcing the saucer section to make contact with the Gorn's shields. Simultaneously with ship to shield contact, Kitara dumped the entire contents of the phaser bank into their shields, causing it to over load. The over load would have

normally been bled off, but Losira had already damaged the equipment. From Henson's point of view, it was a lucky strike.

"Keep on them," Garcia ordered. "Kitara, take a boarding party, now. I want the Gorn Captain alive if possible."

"Done," Kitara said, paging her top security officers to meet her in the transporter room.

"They're getting ready to go to warp," McKnight said.

"Tap one of their warp nacelles," Garcia said.

McKnight rolled her eyes, but complied, bringing the ship in closer. She bumped the Gorn's ship. It was enough of a jolt to trip a fault in the Gorn's warp system, but not enough to make major damage to either ship. None the less, everyone on the New Constitution felt it. One of the patients already in sickbay sustained a new injury.

"Is your inertial dampeners malfunctioning?" Henson asked.

"Slightly," Garcia said.

"Jurak to Captain," came the call from sickbay. "Do you mind not rocking the boat! I'm trying to work down here."

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," Garcia said, and cut him off. "Do we have any phaser charges left?"

"We might get a spark," McKnight said.

"Fine. Pull up closer and spark it," Garcia said.

McKnight did and a short burst of phasers lit up the aft section of the Gorn ship. McKnight read off the damage report, noting nothing of serious consequence, but no doubt the hit irritated some Gorn officers who were having to reroute power to keep things going on their end.

"Kitara to Garcia," Kitara called. "We have the Bridge and control. I need another ten minutes to sweep the rest of the ship."

"Find McCoy," Garcia said. "I'm sending over more personnel to assist in the mop up."

"Very well," Kitara said.

"If you have things under control, I'm returning to the rescue operation," Garcia said.

"We'll join you shortly," Kitara said. "K out."

"McKnight, get us back to the Einstein." Garcia turned to Henson. "Satisfied?"

Henson nodded. "Your crew performs well together. Thank you."

Once back at the Einstein, the rescue effort resumed. The Gorn ship pulled up along side the New Constitution and assisted in the efforts, using their transporters to expedite the transfer of crew to the New Constitution.

"The Gorn ship is hailing us," Trini said.

"On screen," Garcia said.

Kitara was at the command chair. "Sir, Admiral McCoy is not on board this ship. Computer records show that there was a long range shuttle on board. It departed on a heading for Cestus Three, one human and one Gorn on board. The Gorn ship is fully operational if you would like me to pursue. The shuttle will likely arrive before us, but we will be close enough on its heels to watch it land and have an assault team on the surface to stop them."

"No," Henson said.

"Excuse me?" Garcia said.

"I will go," Henson said. "I will take ten of my best officers. It's my job to rescue McCoy."

"What makes it your job?" Garcia asked.

"Can I speak to you in private?" Henson asked.

"Stand by, Kitara," Garcia said. Garcia got up and went to the ready room, Henson on his heels.

"Captain or not, I have seniority on you," Henson said. "McCoy was my mission, and I will go and rescue him. Your job is to get my crew and ship back to the nearest Starbase and notify Star Fleet Command of our situation."

"I think I am more equipped for rescuing McCoy than you might imagine," Garcia said.

"Your ship is barely held together with strings and spit," Henson said. "And you're wasting my time. Get your officers back on your ship now, beam me and my men over, and let me be on my way. Besides, I have something else to ask you, which requires me letting you in on a secret. There were aliens on my ship that McCoy was assisting. No one knows about them but me and McCoy. It needs to stay that way. If my first officer followed orders, as soon as he arrived he beamed them to a guest quarters and put a guard on them. According to McCoy, these aliens must survive at all cost. I need you to see to their well being until I return with McCoy. No one else can know about this. Now, can I trust you, or am I going to have to put you in the Brig and make my First Officer Captain? I'll do that if I have to, but I'd rather take my first officer with me. So, what's it going to be?"

"McCoy is my father," Garcia said.

"I know," Henson said. "That's another reason why you shouldn't go. And another reason why I'm inclined to trust you with my secret mission."

"Your secret is safe with me," Garcia said. "Garcia to Kitara. As soon as the Einstein's officer's are on board, you and my crew are to return here."

"But, Sir, we could..." Kitara began to protest.

"Kitara, we have more important mission objectives to consider and we need to trust someone else to recover McCoy," Garcia said.

"Aye," Kitara said, disappointment in her voice. "What shall I do with the Gorn prisoners?"

Henson hadn't thought of this, either. "Leave them in their Brig. If I need to negotiate, they may become valuable."

"Agreed," Garcia said. "Oh, and make sure they can't get out. You know how people hate getting locked up in their own Brigs and so they build a secret escape."

"Aye," Kitara said.

"Thank you, Captain," Henson said, extending his hand.

"Go, you're burning daylight," Garcia said, shaking his hand briefly.

"John Wayne, right?" Henson asked, on the way out the door. He tapped his com. badge. "Einstien's senior officers report to transporter room four. The remaining crew will be temporarily assigned to the New Constitution until you arrive at the nearest Starbase, where you will wait for further orders from Star Fleet Command. Captain Garcia is in charge, treat him as you would me. Captain Henson out."

“Captain to Engineering,” Garcia said, speaking over Captain Henson’s speech that rambled on as he waited for the turbo lift. As soon as Henson was in the lift and the doors were closed, he continued: “Make preparations to haul the Einstein to K-7.”

“Captain, we just got the NC’s engines up and running,” Gomez complained.

“Are you saying you can’t tow her?” Garcia said.

“No, Sir,” Gomez said. “We can tow her, but the best speed I can give you is warp two. It would take us a month to reach the nearest Starbase.”

“Well, that’s why we’re going to K-7, it’s closer, and should only take what, fourteen days?” Garcia said.

“Roughly, barring no issues,” Gomez said. “Why don’t we just leave it here and send a recovery team back?”

“We’re not leaving it here,” Garcia said. “Do the best you can. You have the Einstein’s crew that you can employ in that endeavor. Also, make a priority list on New Constitution repairs and assign work teams. I doubt we’ll have the Einstein’s crew long and I want as many systems operational as you can get before they leave.”

“Understood,” Gomez said, again wondering why she left the Enterprise.

“The Gorn ship is leaving,” McKnight announced.

“I see it,” Garcia said.

Kitara entered the Bridge like a storm and without saying a word went directly to the Ready Room. Trini raised an eyebrow. Garcia shrugged and excused himself. He found her waiting for him, arms akimbo.

“Allow me to take the Path Finder to go after McCoy,” Kitara said.

“No,” Garcia said. “McCoy, though important, is a tangent we can’t afford right now. Our top priority is finding those G-devices.”

“McCoy is an asset that the Federation shouldn’t lose,” Kitara said. “Even I know that.”

“Kitara, I need you to stay focused,” Garcia said. “Let this go.”

Losira appeared. “Do you know that there are Grays on your ship?” she asked.

Kitara grabbed the hilt of her dagger.

“Grays?” Kitara asked.

“The Kalandans have encountered them before,” Losira said. “They are dangerous creatures, not to be trusted.”

Garcia crossed the room and stared out the window, intuition telling him there was a connection here with his missing time on Iotia and McCoy’s return to life.

“Come with me,” Garcia told Kitara.

They took a lift down and approached the guest quarters. The guards went to attention, each putting a hand on a phaser.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the first guard said. “The guests are not to be disturbed. Captain Henson’s orders.”

“I’m in charge of this ship and need to speak with our guests,” Garcia said.

“Sorry, Sir,” he said. “Your orders pertain to the operation of this vessel. My orders pertain to the security of the guests.”

Kitara stepped aggressively forwards. Garcia stayed her hand. Doors opened on either side of the guest quarters and Einstein security stepped out. The door behind Garcia opened as well, but the security didn’t barge out. They were armed and well positioned for defense.

Garcia smiled. "Just testing your security," Garcia said. "I trust you have also put up an anti transporter field."

The guard smiled, but didn't give away his secret.

"Carry on," Garcia said. He turned and continued down the corridor.

Kitara on his heels held her piece until the turbolift door shut. "I'm going to kill him. How dare he talk to you like that on our ship?!"

"At ease," Garcia said. "I'm still going to talk to the occupants of that room."

"How?" Kitara asked.

"I'm going to use my Kelvan transporter," Garcia said.

"Given the side effects, should you be using it so soon after your operation?"

Kitara said.

"I'll try and limit my exposure. Kitara, I have to know what the Grays know," Garcia said. "It's a long story. I promise to catch you up to speed. In the mean time, I want you to do something for me."

"What's that?" Kitara asked.

"I want you to take a team over to the Einstein and scavenge materials for the NC. Stowe the stuff on the Path Finder to avoid arousing suspicions. I want phasers, photon torpedoes, medical supplies, emergency rations, anything that the NC might need after we drop the Einstein's personnel off on K-7. Correction, anything that we can get to function again."

"I thought we were taking them to the nearest Federation Starbase," Kitara said.

"Are you kidding?" Garcia said. "We're too hot for that. We'll be arrested the moment we set foot on a Starbase. If my reprieve from Admiral Singer comes through, we might consider it, but I'm going to want to drop them off and be on our way as soon as possible, if you know what I mean. Even if I have to use my Kelvan transporter to expedite their departure."

"Understood," Kitara said.

Garcia pulled up his sleeve to reveal a cloth thin bracelet of gold, with a silver button. He touched the button, shifted through all the potential options, and then disappeared. He reappeared in the Gray's guest quarters. The three drones took up defensive positions around the queen. A large Royal Bengal Tiger stepped forwards.

"We've been expecting you," the Tiger said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Garcia's hand hovered over the button to the Kelvan bracelet, his only defense against the Tiger. The Tiger sat on its haunches, its tail curling around it, the tip flexing, as if it were nothing more than a giant house cat. The drones calmed a little and went back to work on a project. If Garcia blinked or tilted his head slightly, he saw a human female instead of a Tiger. It was like looking at a picture that changed depending on the angle of viewing.

"I am sorry I was not able to help McCoy," the Tiger said, shifting from female to tiger form.

"Who are you?" Garcia asked, his voice startling him. It became apparent to him that the tiger had been using telepathy to communicate with him. He tried to hold his head so that the female version of her stayed visible.

"Of course," the Tiger nodded. "Where are my manners? My name is Aahla and I have been assigned to you."

"Excuse me?" Garcia asked, performing a search on the name Aahla via his implant. There was an Egyptian connection. Aahla, or Amenti, meant 'field of peace,' and she was a goddess of the Underworld, known as the Lady of the Gates. She greeted the dead as they crossed over.

"You're familiar with Gary Seven, an agent sent back in time to save Earth?" Aahla asked.

"Yes," Garcia said. That was an easy one. "He was accidentally intercepted by the Enterprise that had traveled back in time to conduct studies of the 1968 time period, if I'm not mistaken."

"Indeed," Aahla said, smiling at Garcia's naivety for he seemed to actually believe it had been an accident. "He had a cat with him. Do you remember her name?"

"Yes," Garcia said. "Isis?"

"Very nice," Aahla said. "As Isis was there to aid Gary Seven, I have come to aid you."

"Very presumptuous of you," Garcia said. "I don't need your help."

"You will," Aahla said. "You only think your life is complicated. Wait till the gods start their little war. You're a pawn in this war, but with me, you might just come through it okay. But more importantly, the human race will come through it okay."

Garcia processed this information while shifting his attention to the female Gray. She was tall, even taller than Garcia, and almost looked human. Her skin was gray with sparkles that flashed like gold glitter when she moved. Her hair was gold with silver highlights. "And who are you?" Garcia asked.

"Princess Rgthrolo," the gray female said. "You do not remember me, because I came after the divergence."

"Divergence?" Garcia asked. "Does everything have to be cryptic? For once, I just want a straight forward answer that makes sense and doesn't leave me reeling."

"Will you allow me to touch you?" the princess asked.

"By all means," Garcia said, offering his hand.

She stepped forward and put her fingers against the side of his face. "Our minds are one," she said, and that was all she needed to say. Their minds instantly merged, with her mind dominant. She caught him up to speed on what she knew of the other Garcia, of their original mind meld, of their escape from the hidden Preserver base, of the other

Garcia's promise, which was not technically his but binding to him none the less, at least by the Princess's perception of things. McCoy, before he was so rudely kidnapped, was trying to fulfill Garcia's pledge to find her a planet that she could live out her life on, and repopulate her species outside of the control of the Preservers that held her race as slaves. The reason Garcia felt compelled to help her was because she had helped the Garcia clone to rescue McCoy, which was part of the deal. She had assumed the other Garcia was killed when the Preserver base was destroyed, but now, due to Garcia's near death experience with Q, which he had passed off as a dream and had nearly forgotten until the mind meld brought it to the foreground, she could see that the other Garcia had survived, escaping through a Gateway, perhaps accidentally attuned to Earth's past. When it came to the Preservers, it was always hard to tell what was accident and what was intended for they played too many games, even games against each other. With their minds as one, definitions and explanations to concepts or activities happened almost simultaneously with question tangents. For example, as she mentioned gateway, Garcia became curious, and the image and explanation of a gateway rose in his mind. The gateways were transdimensional portals, created by the gods, allowing for instantaneous travel to any part of the Universe. The gods were hyper dimensional beings that lived outside the known Universe and were exploring this Universe through telepathy with the Grays and telepathically controlled, holographic remotely operated vehicles.

This explanation gave Garcia sudden understanding to how the god Apollo had managed to double his size when he confronted Kirk. He was a hologram! The gods were the Preservers! They were the ones conducting experiments on human populations, relocating people to other planets, which explained so much. It explained the Kohms and the Yangs on Omega four. It explained Miri's planet and Iotia. And it explained Miramee's planet and the Preserver artifact that deflected asteroids. And it explained Garcia's dream about the Earth and the Gorn and how the dinosaurs had been killed.

(Iconanian Gateways!) Garcia thought.

(The Iconanian were an experiment of the gods. They were destroyed when they stole the gateway technology. Their history is complicated,) the princess offered. The Preservers found the Gateway technology more stable and safe than the randomness of transwarp drives, though it was transwarp drives that allowed the Preservers to disperse their Gates throughout the known Universe. The Guardian of time is a Preserver construct. There were other gateways, of course, gateways connected via wormhole technology, put in place by the Ancients, a people represented by Aahla. The Princess couldn't share information about Aahla's agenda, since she knew little of her or her mission. The Princess only knew that Aahla had a great dislike for the Preservers and that they were often drawn into confrontation with the Grays, who were forced to do the Preservers bidding.

The Princess let go of Garcia and he staggered back against the wall, his hand going to his head. He slid to the floor, his head pounding, and his new found strength fading.

"Okay," he said, gasping for air. "That was less cryptic, but it still left me reeling. Are you saying that my dream wasn't a dream?"

"The dream suggests that your divergent self escaped to Earth's past," the Princess said. "I do not have access to the Preserver Libraries, so I can not confirm this as truth, but I would not be surprised, given what I know of Earth's history."

“Can you make me an Iconian Gateway?” Garcia asked.

“Not with the technology available to me here,” the Princess said. “I can offer you a substitute. I can create wormhole based technology that can connect two points in space. It would require a minimum of two gates. I can place a gate on the New Constitution and one on the Path Finder. No matter how distant they are apart, you could always cross through the portal to get to the other ship. I can make as many gates as you like, aligning each subsequent gate to the original construct, so you could travel anywhere within your own system of gates. It’s not as efficient as the Iconian Gateways, as you prefer to call them, but it will meet your current needs.”

“That would be useful,” Garcia said, nodding. “But I would need an Iconian Gateway capable of temporal shifts in order to go and rescue Afu and my clone.”

“Your time stream is complicated enough without you going back in time,” Aahla said. “My primary function is to help you minimize your disturbance of the timeline. If we’re not careful, you will enrage a species who take their temporal vengeance out on the first Enterprise.”

“Wonderful,” Garcia said.

“The Orbs I gave to you as a gift can also locate and access the cloaked Preserver wormhole gates,” the Princess said.

“Yeah, well, I no longer have access to them,” Garcia lamented, wondering where they may have went after Picard confiscated them. “Don’t suppose you can build more of those for me.”

“Not at this juncture or with the technology available,” the Princess said.

“Okay, well, this has been fun and all, but I got to get back to work,” Garcia said. “As you now know, Princess, I’m trying to keep the Universe as I know it from unraveling, even as we speak.”

“I understand,” the Princess said. “You may delay in your promise to find me a planet to live on in order to recover the G-Devices.”

“Thank you,” Garcia said.

“With your permission, I would like to construct a wormhole gate in these quarters, and then build a second on the Path Finder,” the Princess said. “Once the two gates are operational, you can travel to and from the ships. This would no doubt help you in your efforts to be in multiple places at once as well as facilitate the recovery of these weapons.”

“Indeed,” Garcia said. “That would be very helpful. And you can add a third gate to the SaLing?”

“Yes,” the Princess said. “It is primitive technology, compared to the Iconian Gateways. Your replicator can provide the materials that the drones will need to construct the portals.”

“And can I use these gates to travel through time?” Garcia asked.

“Negative,” the Princess said. “Again, I can only construct gateways that work in tandem to other gateways. Aahla’s people have secured the temporal gateways, regulating their use to their own agenda. Only a few of these gateways have been recovered by the Preservers. The only temporal gateway available to the Federation that I am aware of is the Guardian of Time. Your divergent self destroyed the temporal gateway available at Iotia when you destroyed the Preserver base.”

“Wonderful,” Garcia said. “Aahla, who gave you or your people the authority to regulate time travel?”

“We don’t regulate time travel,” Aahla said. “We merely regulate who uses our gates to travel through time. It’s the same thing Star Fleet is doing by limiting access to the Guardian of Time. We monitor time disruptions in order to minimize the potential for damage and we also send agents back in time to help create and secure the best possible future for those I represent.”

“So, in other words, you are no better than the Preservers,” Garcia said.

“You can’t compare us,” Aahla said. “I seek to protect what you perceive as the future, what I perceive to be the present. The Preservers are merely conducting experiments to see what species they can perfect in an attempt to extend a line of biological organisms into the future to adversely affect what I perceive to be the present. The Preservers were successful in creating a species we call the Omegans. We have been waging a temporal war for control of my present, your future. Gary Seven was on the Earth to prevent the human race from being conquered by the Omegans. We have always considered the Grays complicit with the Omegans and the Preservers, but because of the agreement you have made with the Princess and your struggle to preserve her, we have been forced to re-evaluate our position regarding them. Gary Seven and Isis have become advocates on your behalf. I was sent to monitor the situation and make sure it doesn’t get out of hand. Believe me, there are a number of us who think the best possible temporal line is to simply destroy you and the Princess here and be done with it. They believe we risk too much on you. There are others who say you are so bent on self destruction that we needn’t do anything. You will be dead on your own initiative soon enough. The problematic variable is how many people you take out with you when you go. Your line is very complicated, Garcia, but I am here to help. You only need to keep an open mind.”

Garcia was reminded of his conversation with Guinan. She had told him to expect a guide or a helper. Could this be it? Was Guinan an agent, like Gary Seven? If so, where was her cat? Perhaps Data’s cat Spot was her familiar. No, he told himself. He had accidentally mind melded with Spot and he was fairly certain that Spot was just your average cat. Then again, maybe Amanda Q was his spirit guide that Guinan had told him to watch out for. No, that couldn’t be, because if anyone held any animosity towards Q, it would be Guinan. What had Q done to Guinan to earn her wrath? She was so meek and calm most of the time, but absolutely driven to the boiling point of anger when it came to Q. Picard’s Q. Did it matter what Q? Q was Q, right? And what did it mean that Garcia was attracted to Amanda Q given that all Q’s were Q.

Garcia shivered.

“Are you well?” the Princess asked.

“Just considering all the possibilities,” Garcia said. “Look, I don’t have time or the energy to deal with this right now. I hate the concept of time travel and paradoxes give me a headache. I literally get trapped in cyclic thinking trying to resolve the issues it raises. Hell, just your presence here raises questions. I can only deal with what is, the here and now. The future will just have to deal with its own problems.”

“We are,” Aahla said. “Just as Kirk had to clean up Earth’s ignorance when they destroyed the whales, and Earth is still cleaning up the pollution created four hundred

years ago, we are cleaning up your mess. Unfortunately, we can't just erase things. We are what and who we are in part because of our histories, so history is important."

Garcia nodded and called Losira via his implant. Losira sent an agent over. The Losira agent materialized into being in the way of her Kalandan transporter and was just as much Losira as the Losira computer linked to his implant or the one walking the Path Finder.

"Losira, this is Princess Rgthrolo," Garcia said. "You will stay here and assist her. Let me know if she has any needs that you can't help her with. Princess, Aahla, if you need to speak to me, just relay it through Losira."

"Take two of the drones with you back to the Path Finder, so they can begin the construction of the primary gate," the Princess said. "The remaining drone and I can complete this one here."

Garcia agreed and two of the drones stepped closer to him, signifying their willingness to serve. Garcia touched the button on his bracelet and the three of them were instantly on the Path Finder. He instructed a Losira agent to assist them and asked them to build the wormhole gate in the shuttle bay, and to do so in a way that would not interfere with regular shuttle bay operations. His hand shook as he resisted the urge to reconnect to the Kelvan computer system.

From there he went to his quarters. Rivan was there, playing Lokai-Bele by herself. She brightened and dropped what she was doing to greet him. Clemmons was on the table, something Garcia didn't allow. All he had to do was point at the floor and Clemmons hopped down off the table.

"Everything all right?" she asked.

"Do you know the myth about Atlas?" Garcia asked.

"No," Rivan said. "Is it a good story?"

"I'll tell you about it sometime. Right now, I need a power nap," Garcia said.

"Would a massage help you get there?" Rivan asked.

"Would you mind?" Garcia asked.

"Of course not!" Rivan said, eager to be useful.

Rivan started with Garcia's head and neck and before she got to his shoulders, he was sound asleep. She found it extremely funny when Ambassador Clemmons hopped up on the bed and began kneading Garcia's back with its tiny cat paws. She leaned over and kissed the cat, "You are so helpful," she praised.

♪♪▶

Captain Garcia's power nap lasted maybe an hour. He awoke to find Clemmons and Rivan sleeping peacefully with him. Using his implant, he checked in with Kitara and Losira and discovered everything was running smoothly without him. And so, he told them to call via his implant if they should need him, and returned to sleep. He slept a full six hours, got up, ate a bite with Rivan, used the toilet, showered, and got into a fresh uniform. He felt much better than he had been earlier. He beamed from his quarters on the Path Finder to his quarters on the New Constitution and from there proceeded to the Bridge. The ship was humming with activity as the Einstein's crew hustled to get things done. No doubt some of the things they wanted done were just to increase their own comfort level. Having the replicators online, for instance, would be a huge benefit. So many faces he didn't know, he thought, and all he had to do was call up the Einstein's crew and glance it over as he walked, but he decided to just enjoy the

moment without having to know everything, which was not a feeling that came over him often.

A Yeoman approached him with purpose in her stride. She couldn't have been more than twenty years of age and obviously fresh out of the Academy. "Captain, would you approve this for me?"

Garcia read over the request and then pulled up her profile and stats, which she had provided in case he was interested in her proposal. While he read through her information, confirming that she was indeed fresh out of the academy with an emphasis on clerical training and an expert in information science, he asked, "You want a permanent transfer to my ship?"

"Yes, please," she said.

"Tomoko," Garcia said, trying to find the right words. "I'm honored by your request, but there is no guarantee that I will be allowed to keep this ship or command."

"I feel otherwise," Tomoko said. "And I have a number of friend's serving on the Einstein that feel as I do. You're bigger than life and I want to be a part of that. I know I am just a Yeomanette and not on a command track, but I think my profile shows that I am versatile and that I would be quite valuable to you as a ship's clerk."

"I don't think you understand the full ramifications of what you're asking," Garcia said. "If you have been keeping up with current events, you would know I'm not exactly in Star Fleet's favored status."

"Yes, I know," Tomoko said. "But here you are, on a ship you commandeered, obviously on some secret mission, with Klingons on board to add to the intrigue. This has adventure written all over it and I want in. Sir."

"You may not feel that way if you knew everything I knew," Garcia said.

"I doubt that there is anything you could say to persuade me otherwise," Tomoko said.

"Your ideas of romanticizing adventure may get the best of you, Tomoko. Very well," Garcia said, surrendering to her charm and persistence. "Tell you what. Compile a list of Einstein personnel that would like to join me on my ship and depending on what Star Fleet says when we arrive at the Starbase, I'll sign your requests."

"Thank you, Sir," Tomoko said, brightening ten fold.

Garcia watched her walk away, almost chuckling at the noticeable difference in her stride. There was a slight bounce in her walk, as if she were truly happy. He studied her walk a little longer than he should, wondering if everyone in Star Fleet knew of his weakness for miniskirt option on the Uniform. The rogue Deana Troi program shook her head sadly, commenting on the 'Cosmic Cheerleader' outfit and Garcia's reluctance to delete the picture he had of the real Troi in the said Uniform, which she wore the first week she spent on the Enterprise and never wore again. When Garcia turned back, Kitara was in front of him, scrutinizing her Captain. He closed his eyes for a moment to hide the fact that he was startled and then pushed on. Kitara followed, amused at his discomfort.

"You're looking better," Kitara said.

"I feel better, thank you," Garcia said, sincerely. Whatever interest for Tomoko had leaked through was now gone and he was completely professional again. "Staus report."

“Shields are fully functional,” Kitara said, following. “All computers are online. We used Einstein templates and data banks to get them up and running, since Star Fleet is not allowing us to update our system information via subspace communication. The mass replicator is also online. We’re still having issues with the personal replicators, but they should all be operational sometime today. “Phaser banks are fully charged.”

“I see we have our priorities,” Garcia jested.

“We are ready for combat,” Kitara said, taking his sarcasm as a compliment. “I’ve been meaning to ask you. When you were revived from your operation, you said something to the effect that you were the destroyer of worlds. The Gorn commander who attacked us also referred to you as the destroyer of worlds. Considering the type of weapons we have in our possession, I can’t help but think that there is a connection.”

“I had a dream when I was dead,” Garcia began.

“You went to Sto-Vo-Kor?” Kitara asked, amazed. “I have heard of this happening, but they have always been stories of a friend’s friend in nature.”

“It wasn’t Sto Vo Kor,” Garcia said. “And I, too, have heard stories of people who have come back from the dead with strange tales. As Doctors, and scientists, we are given sensitivity training so that we don’t dismiss the ramblings of our patients unduly. Too many patients have been able to describe in detail what they heard the doctors say and do, or tell stories of meeting loved ones that have been dead for years. To speed the patient’s recovery, it is often necessary to help integrate these artifacts into the patience paradigm and help them find personal meaning. The part that always got my attention was that if they met people in their version of the after life, it was always a loved one who was diseased. I have never heard a story of someone returning from the dead and claiming to have met someone who was alive. It’s always someone they knew that had died before their event.”

“Did you meet a lost loved one?” Kitara asked, totally absorbed in the conversation. They got in a lift and headed towards the Bridge.

“Unfortunately not,” Garcia said. He sighed. “This is between us. I met an entity known as Q. Q took me to Earth, millions of years in the past. This was a time before a major extinction event that nearly wiped out all life on Earth. The devastation was caused by an asteroid slamming into the planet. Anyway, she showed me a primitive Gorn settlement on Earth and a preserver artifact that is known to deflect asteroids. I watched myself as I destroyed this artifact and can only assume that the Gorn settlement was destroyed because of that act, as well as all the dinosaurs.”

“That is why the Gorn attacked us?” Kitara asked, stepping off onto the bridge, but staying near the lift. “They want revenge on you? For something that may have happened millions of years ago?”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Garcia said. “The Gorn didn’t start interstellar travel until about a hundred and fifty years ago. They would not have established settlements on Earth. And even if they did, if I destroyed it, there would be no one left to remember who did what.”

“Puzzling,” Kitara said. “But you have been given a sign. You are favored by the gods. This is a good omen.”

“Or a really bad omen,” Garcia said. “I know of no stories where humans benefited by interacting with gods. In fact, it usually always turns out bad for the human involved. They are either shot, hung, fed to lions, or cursed with plaques, diseases, and

stripped of all wealth and credibility. You should read the Odyssey. Odysseus's men all start out pretty smart, but as the story goes on they grow less and less intelligent, as if they're drinking from lead cups; stupid to the point of being dead. And the Gods didn't help any. Let's not go making anything of my dream. I am sure what happened when I was dead was just my active imagination."

"You were dead and incapable of active imagination. Everyone should know, but I will do as you ask," Kitara said.

"Captain, we have a ship on long range scanners, heading directly for us," an Einstein officer said, interrupting their private little chat.

"Your name?" Garcia asked, moving towards center stage and his command chair. Kitara took inventory of the Bridge crew and then went to her station when she was satisfied everyone was in their respective place.

"Owens, Sir," the Officer said. "First Lt. David Owens."

"Type of ship, Lt. Owens," Garcia asked.

He turned back to his station to retrieve the information as it was just coming available. "Federation," Owens said. "It appears to be the Enterprise. Shall I hail them?"

Garcia sighed. "No. I suspect they will be hailing us, shortly. Continue on our current heading."

"We are being hailed," Lt. Owens said.

Garcia nodded, as if saying, told you so. "On screen," Garcia said, taking his command chair. "This is Captain Garcia of the USS New Constitution. My compliments to you and your crew, Captain Picard. How may I be of service?"

"I don't know what sort of game you are playing, Ensign, but you will heave to and prepare to be taken into custody," Captain Picard said.

"No doubt, Captain Picard, you have received the message I sent Star Fleet, updating them on my rescue operation," Garcia said. "I am on my way to the nearest Starbase, via K-7 where I must pick up some necessary supplies in order to continue with repairs in order to reach said Starbase."

"Star Fleet received your message," Captain Picard said. "I am ordering you to heave to."

"Captain," Owens interrupted. "Four new ships have just appeared on short range scans. They're on an intercept course, traveling warp eight. Sir! They're Gorn ships."

"They must have been waiting in ambush," Kitara said. "But how would they know we would be in this quadrant?"

"Captain Picard, I am sorry that I will not be able to comply with your request at this time, but would greatly appreciate it if you would expedite your rendezvous. Garcia out," Garcia said, giving Trini a sign to terminate the transmission

"Let's cut the Einstein and increase speed to warp seven, in the direction of the Enterprise," Owens said.

"We can't do warp seven," Kitara said. "The warp coils can't handle anything above warp four until they have been degaused and fine tuned. They've set too long. The Gorn ships are powering up their weapons systems."

"Fine, cut the Einstein and make a run for the Enterprise at warp four," Owen said.

"Either way, they over take us before the Enterprise is in range to assist," Garcia said. "Bring us about, heading one four one, point three two three."

“That’s directly for the Gorn ships,” the helm protested.

“Your name?” Garcia asked.

“Second Lt. Ted Nelson, sir,” the helm officer said.

“Lt. Nelson, turn directly for the Gorn,” Garcia said, pushing the yellow alert button. “Raise shields. Hail the Gorn.”

“Broadcasting on all frequencies,” Owens said.

“To the approaching Gorn vessels,” Garcia said, standing up. “This is Captain Tammias Garcia of the USS New Constitution. I am in the process of a rescue operation. Please state your intentions.”

A Gorn appeared. “Tammias Garcia, destroyer of worlds. You must die.” And they cut their signal.

“Why does everyone hate me?” Garcia asked.

“I don’t hate you,” Owens said.

“Thanks,” Garcia said, pushing the red alert button on his chair. “Red alert. Battle stations. This is not a drill. Owens, keep hailing the Gorn and offer them alternatives to violence, and broadcast it on all frequencies so that Star Fleet knows that we legitimately attempted to avert this crisis.”

“Are we going to drop the Einstein?” Owen asked.

“And give up a ballistic projectile?” Garcia asked. “I think not. Yet.”

“I hope you have more aces up your sleeves,” Kitara said.

“I do,” Garcia assured her, giving her a quick smile. He contacted Losira via his implant and told her to disengage the Path Finder from the New Constitution. She was to hold back and not get in the way, but be ready to give assistance if he called for her. He then casually reached for his left hand and placed a finger on the Kelvan device under his sleeve. He used his Kelvan transporter to beam Aahla and the Grays over to the Path Finder for their own safety. What the their security escort didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them. He was tempted to use his new found “Kelvan” powers on the Gorn ship, but they were still out of range, and he needed to practice letting go. He let go of the button on his bracelet with minimal discomfort, gripping the armrest to his chair in effort to resist reaching for it again. He noticed Kitara was watching him, so he covered by taking out a stick of gum. He popped it into his mouth and offered her a stick. She shook her head no.

The looming battle was going to be tough, but his mind told him it was winnable. Sure, he could also use the Path Finder to even the odds a bit, but he was determined not to give away his secret, yet, and that was another reason to force himself to not use the Kelvan computer. The Enterprise would be in recording range by now, using long range sensors, and someone would no doubt notice any oddities if he won this battle too easy. The four Gorn ships and their attack profiles presented Garcia a very straight forward equation and though there were four of them, he had some advantage from his simulation experience and his Star Fleet training.

As Garcia chewed his gum he folded the foil unconsciously. This had been the third time Kitara has seen him go for the gum and she couldn’t resist asking about it. “Is that a stimulant?” she asked.

“No, just gum,” Garcia said. “You sure you don’t want a piece?”

“No!” Kitara said, acting as if he were doing drugs.

Everyone took a moment to see the exchange and then turned back to their work. No one else asked for a piece, either.

"The Enterprise is hailing the Gorn, but getting no response," Owens announced. "They are now hailing us."

Garcia nodded to Trini and she put it "on screen."

"Garcia, change your heading and come towards us," Captain Picard said.

"Got to face this challenge head on, Captain," Garcia said. "Running from it won't change the outcome."

"He's right, Sir," Worf said. "If the Gorn are intent on killing him, turning him around will only give them the advantage."

"Captain, if you'll excuse me, I'm rather busy," Garcia said, and cut Picard off, a second time. Garcia had noticed a change in pitch in one of the back ground noises, no doubt an energy conduit above his head was protesting all the new work. None the less, he called Engineering. "Lt. Gomez, is everything okay?"

"No!" she snapped. "But I don't suppose it matters, does it?"

"Of course it matters, but I don't have time for protests," Garcia said, wondering if a stick of gum might help her calm a bit. "Just keep the engines humming, if you will."

"I'm trying," Gomez said. "Out."

Kitara frowned at Garcia. She didn't like the way he tolerated the needless banter, but she tried to remember that humans had different needs. She would protest if the banter became unprofessional.

"Full power to forward shields and deflectors," Garcia said. He leaned forward in his chair. "Steady, Owens. Prepare to release the tractor beam on my mark, not a moment sooner. Steer us directly at their lead ship."

The first round of the battle happened at warp speeds, with the Gorn ships maneuvering in as close as they could to each other for better chance at a kill. The tension on the Bridge was off the scale, but Garcia appeared to be as calm as he would be if he were playing a simulation. The only other person on the Bridge who seemed calm was Kitara. The New Constitution headed right for the most forward ship and at the last moment dove right through the middle of the Gorn formation, releasing the Einstein from the tractor beam before it did. The lead Gorn ship and the Einstein collided at relativistic speeds, which was one way to simulate a matter antimatter explosion. It was particle physics at its best, only this was smashing atoms at speeds of excess of the speed of light. The Einstein and the Lead Gorn ship disintegrated, sending particles and atoms flying, spreading out in a pattern that resembled two galaxies hitting dead on, collapsing to a point and then flying off in the other direction while spreading out. The resulting release of energy knocked the remaining four ships out of warp.

"Bring us about," Captain Garcia said. "Three to one isn't bad odds."

"Make that two to one," Kitara said. "The Gorn ship that was the lead's wingman has sustained damaged. It's out of the fight. That leaves us two."

"Full impulse towards the damaged ship," Garcia said. "Prepare to fire phasers."

No one had time to question his orders, they simply performed as instructed.

"Three and four are firing photon torpedoes," Kitara said.

"Brace for impact," Garcia warned. "It's going to get rough."

Indeed, it was difficult for people to stay at their posts as the ship rocked violently. Having the inertial dampeners out of sync made the ride like it was an old

Constitution class ship. Garcia was focused on the battle but at the same time he was wondering how long it would take to fix the problem with the Inertial Dampeners on his own.

“Nelson, steer us under the damaged ship, and bring us within a hundred meters or closer,” Garcia said. “Kitara, target their warp core ejection tube. Now.”

“Firing phasers,” Kitara said.

At point blank range, Garcia would have been mad if she missed. They cut a hole right down the middle of the Gorn ship, the same principle as gutting a fish, and as the air evacuated, so did the warp core, mixing matter and anti matter in an uncontrolled reaction. The resulting explosion took out the New Constitution’s shield and rolled the ship. But it also took out the shields on both Gorn ships that had turned to give chase after the flyby. A moment later one of the ships veered off course and blew up, its warp core failing. The other jumped to warp and fled.

“Damage report,” Garcia asked.

“We have no shields, again, Sir,” Kitara said, rather pleased of the outcome.

“Anything else?” Garcia asked.

“Our warp coils are now badly in need of an alignment. Best possible speed is warp two. Personnel on the aft decks are reporting exposure to radiation,” Kitara added. “Other than that, we appear to have been successful.”

Everyone on the Bridge but Garcia and Kitara cheered.

“That’s enough of that,” Garcia said. “We got lucky.”

The Enterprise dropped out of warp. It took up position above, hailing them.

“Report, Ensign Garcia,” Captain Picard said, standing.

“Sir, only minor damage to systems that were already in need of servicing,” Garcia said. “No major injuries or fatalities to disclose. I do have some personnel that were exposed to radiation and request the appropriate medicines be beamed over.”

“I’ll have Doctor Crusher and a medical team beam right over to assist,” Captain Picard said. “You will beam over to the Enterprise now.”

“No, Sir,” Garcia said. “I can’t do that.”

“Don’t make this harder on yourself than it needs to be,” Captain Picard said. “You are being charged with the theft of a Starship, specifically the USS Constitution, in addition to failing to report for your court martial hearing.”

“I believe, if you contact Admiral Singer, he will be able to clear up the confusion,” Garcia said. “I’m on assignment and have been officially promoted to the rank of Captain. Now, if you want to take over the rescue operation, I will gladly surrender the Einstein’s crew to your capable hands and go about my business. If not, well, we have a bit of an impasse.”

“Don’t make me board your ship and take you by force,” Captain Picard said.

Kitara growled. “Bring it,” she said.

“At ease, number one,” Garcia said. He was fully aware of Worf’s counter challenge in the background. To Captain Picard, Garcia said, “Sir, my personal security would not allow that to happen without a fight. And, there has really been enough killing today, if you don’t mind me saying so. Would it be possible for you and I to have a private conversation, here aboard the New Constitution?”

“Meeting with you will not change my orders,” Captain Picard said. “There is no negotiating the fact that you are to be taken into custody.”

“Very well,” Garcia said. “We won’t negotiate. I invite you to visit with me and after doing so, if you still feel inclined to arrest me, I will surrender to you.”

“I will come and see you,” Picard said, and cut the channel just as Worf started to protest.

“Kitara, escort Captain Picard to my ready room,” Garcia said. Before retiring to his Ready Room, he said, “Good job, everyone. Stand down from Red Alert. Prepare to receive medical teams from the Enterprise. All able bodies, let’s get on the repairs.”

As soon as he was in his ready room, he contacted the Path Finder via his implant and directed Losira to reconnect the Path Finder to the New Constitution and hopefully do it gently enough no one would notice. At the same time, he opened a channel to Star Fleet Command, a Priority One channel, and sent a coded message: “Admiral Pressman, Star Fleet Headquarters, Code One Urgent, immediate response requested. My compliments to you and your staff, and all that nonsense, and now, we cut to the chase. You know, Admiral, I can’t very well do my job if you have every Star Fleet ship out here looking to arrest me. The Enterprise has me dead to rights, and unless you want me blasting the flagship out of the skies or sharing what I know with Picard, I suggest you get me out of this. I have no qualms about going public, either, so don’t gamble. I want you to make the New Constitution a legit deal, providing me some room to duck and cover should anything else go wrong with your plans. Picard and I are meeting any second now. And, in case I don’t hear from you, have a nice day. Yours truly, Captain Tammias Garcia.”

Garcia paced until his guest arrived. Captain Picard and Counselor Troi, followed by Kitara, entered his ready room. He frowned at Troi and disposed of his gum.

“I’m sorry, Sir, but he refused to come without her,” Kitara said. She probably had tried to call and tell him, but was unable to get through to him while he was sending a private message to Fleet. “I’ll escort them both back if you want.”

“No, it’s alright,” Garcia assured her. “Dismissed.”

Kitara departed with a salute which Garcia echoed. He then motioned to the couch, offering his guest a seat. Picard ignored the offer.

“This farce has gone on long enough,” Picard said. “Unless you have something tremendous to share, I expect you to return with me to the Enterprise now.”

“Do you know the mission Admiral McCoy was on?” Garcia asked.

“That is irrelevant,” Picard said.

“Admiral McCoy was kidnapped on Captain Henson’s watch. He and his senior officer are on their way to rescue him even as we speak,” Garcia said.

“I understand how you feel about McCoy,” Picard said, a little softer. “But that does not change the fact that I must bring you in.”

“No,” Counselor Troi said. “This is a tangent to distract us.”

“I’m telling you the truth,” Garcia said.

“Yes, you are,” Troi said. “At least some of it. But your shields are up and you’re blocking me. You’re hiding things.”

“I have orders to keep secrets,” Garcia said. “A great number of lives are dependant on me accomplishing certain goals. You know I didn’t just walk away from my Court Martial. You know I don’t run from things. I face them head on. You also know about the interview with the Klingons back at Earth and you see me now on a ship

with Klingons serving under my command. Surely you can see things aren't what they appear."

"Then come back with me and we'll repair the damage to your reputation," Captain Picard said.

"The damage to my reputation is irrelevant," Garcia said, a bit of anger leaking out. "Lives are at stake." A stray thought struck him at that moment. He called Losira via his implant. (Losira, can you log onto the Enterprise computers without setting off alarms.)

(Affirmative) was here response.

(See if you can locate which part of Star Fleet research received the Preserver Orbs that were confiscated from me.) Garcia motioned to the seats again. "Would you please sit down? Some of the replicators were online before the battle. I could probably make us some tea."

"This is not some cozy, little chat between friends and colleagues," Picard said. "Serious accusations have been made. Evidence pointing to your guilt exists. You have to come with me. Now, if you're not able or willing to deter me from that objective by supplying me with reasonable explanations, then I ask that you do as you promised and surrender to me."

Captain Picard's com. badge rang. He tapped it. "Picard here."

"Sorry to interrupt you, Sir, but you have a priority one call from Star Fleet Command," Commander Riker informed him.

"I'm rather busy at the moment, Number One," Picard said.

"Could you patch it through to him here, Commander Riker," Garcia asked. "I'll give him privacy."

"Captain?" Riker asked.

"Pipe it over," Picard said. Garcia went to the Bridge where he accepted a page from Losira via his implant. He smiled politely at one of the Einstein's crew as if everything was going along about as well as things always do. The crew member did not return the smile.

(Captain Garcia. The Orbs are still on the Enterprise. They are to be taken to a research station at Starbase 12, which was on their way to their next assignment.)

(Can you locate them precisely?) Garcia asked.

(I know exactly where they are. I will show you.)

The exact location came through his implant and Garcia slipped a finger under his sleeve and touched the button on his Kelvan bracelet. A moment later the Preserver Orbs were on the Path Finder, in a drawer in his quarters. No alarms were tripped in the process, so he let go of the bracelet. He took a deep sigh, his hands trembling. Leaving the Kelvan technology was difficult, but it seemed to him that he felt less symptoms overall if he limited his interface time with the Kelvan computer, and that was best achieved by having a clear idea of what he wanted accomplished before he engaged the technology. His mental Troi disagreed with his evaluation and suggested he not use it any more. In this particular instance, he merely pushed the button and let go, with no one observing him doing so, as if he were just scratching his wrist. Still, in that brief moment of real time, he had experienced what seemed like an hour of virtual computer time, in which his mind considered romantic dalliances with members of both crews, drawing out their genetic profiles to look for ideal matches. He also examined the debris of the

destroyed Gorn ships evaluating the damage he had caused, re-enacting the battle looking for weaknesses in the Gorn attack, improving his own attack, and was considering how he might temporarily put the Enterprise out of service so he could escape, even as he monitored the conversation Captain Picard was having with Admiral Singer.

Garcia could have easily immobilized the Enterprise crew with the Kelvan technology and be on his merry way, but that, too, would be throwing away the aces up his sleeve. Picard would know sooner or later when the Orbs came up missing, or, at the least, have very strong suspicions. The final thought that caused him to rebel and resist the Kelvan technology was his thought of kidnapping the real Troi, keeping her with him for the duration of his mission. It so sickened him that he had even considered it as a possibility that he became sick to his stomach.

Troi emerged from the ready room and nodded for Garcia to return. Was she aware of the conflicting emotions he was experiencing? On the one hand, he experienced shame and regretted even entertaining the thoughts that he had had while engaged with the Kelvan technology, but also, there was an overwhelming desire to go back and follow through, or explore the other alternatives the Kelvan computer had provided. Garcia tried to hide the tremor in his hand by reaching for another stick of gum. He took it out, started to unwrap it, and then folded it back and pushed it back into the pack and his sleeve pocket. He couldn't very well chew gum and speak to Picard.

Garcia entered his ready room, Troi right behind him. He felt her studying him, looking for a way into his head. She gently called to him, asking him to open up to her. Picard seemed a bit angry, but his body language suggested that he had apparently decided not to pursue arresting Garcia for the present.

"You've been given a stay of execution from Admiral Singer," Picard said. "I have been ordered to let you go. Further, I have been given no explanations why I should do so. Will you please tell me what this is about?"

"Will this stay between us?" Garcia asked. He really wanted another ally and he especially wanted to be able to give in to Picard.

"I can't promise that," Picard said.

Garcia pursed his lips, trying to decide.

"Tam, please," Troi said, touching his arm.

Garcia nodded, her voice moving him the final distance he needed to go. "I was given the privilege of bringing together the first joint task force, a Federation/Klingon team devoted to seeking out the enemies of the Federation and Klingon Empire," Garcia said. "No small task in and of itself. But apparently, someone in authority, Klingon, Federation, both, I don't know who is more culpable, decided to revitalize a weapon from the past. This weapon is so powerful that if deployed near a star it could wipe out an entire solar system, and was appropriately given the name Project Starburst. The intent was to use a single device against a Borg ship. Two of the weapons have been stolen. It is my job to track them down and recover them before they are used against inappropriate targets."

"What kind of weapon system could be that devastating?" Troi asked.

"Your lives are literally at risk if I tell you more," Garcia said. "I'm already a dead man. I am just trying to win the game in the process."

"I'll risk knowing," Captain Picard said.

"The Genesis Device has been resurrected and it's a much more deadly device than it was previously," Garcia said. "This version doesn't even make the pretense of creating life. It's only aim is to destroy it."

Picard seemed very troubled. He took two steps closer to Garcia, his eyes fierce and determined. "I want you to be very precise in what you tell me next. Are you saying Admiral Singer and Admiral Sheaar are in violation of the Federation Klingon treaty?"

"Yes," Garcia agreed. "Sheaar knows about it. I don't know what Singer knows. I suspect Singer is just a fall guy."

"If what you're saying is true, then so are you," Troi said.

"Another good reason for me to succeed in recovering those weapons," Garcia said.

"Who else knows about this?" Picard asked.

"I'll provide you with more information when I can prove it," Garcia said. "Right now, the only evidence I have is that Sheaar, Singer, and I were all together in Sickbay on the Enterprise, which is insufficient evidence for the accusation I'm making. Captain, I don't believe that this project was undertaken in a conspiratorial fashion to undermine the stability of the current rapport of our two nations. I think they were honestly just looking for a way to defend ourselves against another Borg incursion."

"Conspiracy or not, we have a treaty," Picard said.

"But if both parties agree to it?" Troi tried.

"The Federation didn't agree to it and I know Gowron didn't sanction it, which leaves only Star Fleet and a rogue Klingon Military agency, and neither have that sort of authority. I can't believe that either party would recreate such a powerful weapon just to hit one Borg ship."

"You're right, they didn't," Garcia said, fully prepared to dissemble, but with just enough truth to add credibility to his story. "They have an experimental transwarp drive onboard the SaLing. After recovering the weapons, I was to proceed to TelKiar system, in Romulan space, where the Borg are currently stripping the planet's resources to build new ships. Once there, I was to deploy one of the weapons and eliminate the Borg threat. I have no doubt that were I to succeed in such a mission that I would be asked to travel to the Delta Quadrant, track down the Borg home world, or worlds, and deliver each planet a fatal blow."

"Do you know what you're saying?" Troi asked. "What were your orders after that? Take out the Romulans home world?"

"You can't compare the Borg threat to the Romulans," Garcia argued. "You can negotiate with the Romulans."

"Tam, it's genocide," Troi said. "It immoral! You know better."

"But it has to be done," Picard said, surprising both Garcia and Troi.

"Captain!" Troi said, not hiding her shock.

"The Borg will only keep coming," Picard said. "The fringe worlds are already scared we can't protect them and they've been yelling for some sort of defense to be established. Only a tremendous blow to the Borg capabilities and ego, such as the one Garcia is describing, has a chance to reduce the likelihood of another attack on the Federation..."

“Or make them more determined,” Troi said. “You may be able to knock down a hornets nest with a stone, but you’re still left with a lot of angry hornets flying around. Tam, how much did you know about this when you accepted the mission?”

“I was simply told that I was to be put in charge of a Federation/Klingon task force, given a ship, and provided a mission objective,” Garcia said. “It sounded like fun.”

“Are you having fun, yet?” Troi asked.

“Not particularly, no,” Garcia said. “I was also told my legal troubles would go away, but I suppose I should have known better. In hindsight, it seems that it was supposed to appear that my career with Star Fleet was finished.”

“Has Star Fleet research resolved the issues surrounding the Transwarp drive?” Picard asked.

“Not all of them,” Garcia said, again deciding to embellish a little. “One of the quirks associated with the transwarp travel is that all the Klingons pass out when we return to normal space, hence the need for the non Klingon crew members. Some of the issues have been resolved by minimizing the time we are traveling at transwarp, which literally translates to us making small, quantifiable jumps from place to place. Heisenberg’s Unvertainty princple seems to be tempered with a Hawkings-Shrodinger potentiality quantum field reduction transcriber, allowing the computer to read, predict, and adjust space time energy matter packets at the micro and macro levels of existence, very similar to the transporter. Best analogy is that at transwarp, matter ceases to exist as we know it and we are literally translated directly into energy, reduced to information in its purest form and reintergrated at our destination.”

“Still, the processing power alone would require every computer on the Enterprise working in tandem to resolve the most rudimentary coordinate jump,” Picard said.

“They solved that by mixing a Kelvan computer system with a Kalandan computer system,” Garcia said.

“Which explains why Sheaar and Singer wanted you,” Picard said. “The few Kelvan left in this Galaxy are either hiding, or have sworn off all Kelvan technology in favor of remaining human.”

“Captain, are you wanting Garcia to go and destroy the Borg home worlds?” Troi asked.

“If the Borg are indeed assimilating the TelKiar people and technology, the Borg will have a nice running shot at the Federation,” Picard said. “There’s no telling how many ships they will be able to launch from that world.”

“Intel puts the ships already under construction at six,” Garcia said. “But really, all of that is irrelevant if I can’t recover those missing weapons before they’re inappropriately used and the Federation and Klingon Empire go to war.”

“What have the Gorn to do with this?” Picard asked.

“That is a separate issue,” Garcia said, shaking his head sadly. “Which may have something to do with my rescue of McCoy from the Preservers. They’re the least of my worries at the moment.”

“You have Star Fleet, the Klingon Empire, and the Gorn all looking to capture or kill you. You can’t do this alone,” Picard said.

“I’m not alone,” Garcia said. “I have my crew and I now have two ships at my disposal, the New Constitution and the SaLing. The SaLing is currently soliciting help in preparation for my next task.”

“So, the stories of the war games are true?” Picard asked.

“There was a war game and I commandeered the SaLing in order to more quickly accomplish my mission objectives,” Garcia said. “It’s all legal from the Klingon perspective. None the less, Sheaar can’t afford the loss to his reputation and so he will have friends and acquaintances gunning for me. He certainly won’t be telling them the truth of the situation.”

“You’re still not telling us everything,” Troi said.

“I can’t give away my secrets until I have recovered these weapons and exposed the enemy within,” Garcia said. “Surely you can understand that. Like I said before, I am already dead. I’m just trying to win the game in the process.”

“Would you stop saying that?!” Troi snapped.

“I’m certain that anyone who could beat the Kobayashi Maru challenge, rejected the four options on the Advance Navigation test in favor of his own, which brought the test to five possible solutions, and pulled off the performance of the LoraEs telio LaShinta on Earth with a non Vulcan choir can come up with a resolution to this problem,” Picard said, and reached out and took Garcia’s hand. “But let me help you.”

Garcia nodded, affirming the hand shake gesture with a squeeze. “I could use all the allies I can get,” Garcia said. “I have a lead on at least one of the weapons. I’m on my way to K-7 to follow up on that. It looks like it may go on sale on the Black Market. I have a contact that will get me in the bidding and then I will have to go and play the game. If I think of a way you can assist, I will let you know.”

“I was ordered to let you go,” Captain Picard mused. “But you’re still on the most wanted list. We could add to the illusion that you were on the run by having a little war game of our own. I’ll, of course, let you win so that you can escape, again, with the stolen Star Fleet property. That might raise your esteem at the Black Market.”

“That would be nice, but I don’t want to mar the reputation of my favorite Captain,” Garcia said.

“My reputation is irrelevant,” Picard said. “Lives are at stake.”

“You should take the Einstein’s crew,” Garcia said. “They didn’t ask for any of this.”

“Alright,” Picard said, nodding in agreement. “Do you have sufficient personnel to run your ships?”

“Barely. There are a few people requesting reassignment to the New Constitution,” Garcia said. “Seeing how I kind of destroyed the Einstein and that they have no immediate assignments, it would be nice to have a few more crew at my side.”

“You’re really going to have to stop destroying Star Fleet property,” Troi said.

“Make a ship wide announcement. Take what you need and beam the rest over to the Enterprise,” Picard said. “And thank you for trusting me, Captain.”

“Thank you for your help, Captain. I would clear out all sections immediately surrounding deck nine, auxiliary control,” Garcia said, sending Kitara a message via his implant requesting her to relay to all Einstein personnel that didn’t want to be temporarily reassigned to the New Constitution for an unspecified length of time, on a dangerous mission involving cloak and dagger, should beam immediately over to the Enterprise. Non essential personnel, along with the previous injured were to be the first to go. “You do want to make this look real?”

Picard nodded. "I was going to suggest that particular spot. Easily repaired in ten hours, but will leave a noticeable scar for anyone to inspect when we arrive at K-7 on your heels. A small inconvenience, but would give you time to conclude your business at K-7 before I come for you."

"Unless the Gorn come back for us," Troi said.

"We'll be fine," Picard said.

"Flash your starboard beacons so that I'll know everything is good and that I can leave in good conscience," Garcia said.

"Agreed," Picard said. "And good luck."

"May I have a moment with him alone, Captain," Troi asked.

"Yes," Captain Picard agreed.

Picard departed and Troi turned to Garcia, taking his hand. "Tam, are you sure you're okay? I can't think of anyone I have worried for more lately. When I heard about the parasite and Doctor Crusher told me what the treatment was, I..."

Garcia hugged her. "Shhhh, I'm okay."

"I'm tired of losing you," Troi said. "Every time I turn around it seems like you're near death or dead."

Garcia kissed her. "But I keep coming back," Garcia assured her.

"But this time you're in way over your head. Tam, you know what happened between us was..." Troi began.

"Was wonderful and will never happen again," Garcia said. "I know. I accepted the terms of the moment when we mutually agreed. I have no regrets or wants or illusions that anything more can be of us. Our destinies are diverging, but I am happy now at this moment. I know you love me and want the best. Now, stop being sad for me and go live your life."

"That's what I was going to tell you," Troi said. She smiled and touched his hair. "Good bye, Tam."

Garcia escorted her to the turbo lift, noticing the Bridge crew was still at their stations, no change of faces. When the doors closed on the lift he went to his chair, center stage. With a touch of a button he opened a ship wide intercom. "This is the Captain speaking. Kitara informed you that there is some cloak and dagger play at hand for those who stay on board. I expect absolute trust and compliance with orders even if those orders appear to be illegal and immoral. If you can't deal, this is your last opportunity to beam over to the Enterprise," Garcia said, and turned off the intercom. "Kitara, if I know you, you never powered down the phasers after our confrontation with the Gorn. Am I right?"

"Our phasers are still armed," Kitara said, not bothering to explain that she saw the Enterprise as a threat since their expressed intent was to arrest Garcia.

"And the Enterprise shields are still down, aren't they?" Garcia asked.

"They are," Kitara agreed, uncertain what he was getting at.

"Any more requests to depart the New Constitution?" Garcia asked.

"Eight people have just transported to the Enterprise," Kitara said. "All others have volunteered to stay on board and serve us."

Garcia opened the intercom one more time. "I'm thanking you in advance for staying. You do not realize it, and you may never know the actual details of the mission, but suffice it to say, you will be helping to save billions of lives," Garcia said, and turned

off the ship's intercom. "Kitara, visually target deck nine, point one thousand and fourteen. And be precise, or I'll have your head. Open hailing frequencies." That got some head turns, but Kitara gladly followed orders.

Picard stood and stepped forwards. "Ensign Garcia, this is your last chance for you and your crew to surrender."

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I don't like the deal you're offering," Garcia said. "Kitara, fire!"

The screen went blank when Picard's communications abruptly ended. The forward view came back online. Power seemed to be out all over the Enterprise and then slowly auxiliary power kicked in. The Star Board beacon light was constant for about ten seconds and then started to blink.

"Get us out of here, Helm," Garcia ordered. "Best speed to K-7."

Nelson's mouth was still agape and he was fixated on the screen, unable to comply with his instructions.

"Lt. Nelson?" Garcia said.

"We fired on the Enterprise!" Nelson protested.

"Kitara, beam Lt. Nelson over to the Enterprise," Garcia said. "Make it quick and get me a helm officer that will comply with my orders."

Kitara jerked Nelson from his seat and hauled him roughly towards the lift. Simultaneously with that action she hit her com. badge and called the next person on the duty roster to the Bridge. McKnight arrived on the bridge a few moments after Kitara departed and took her place at the helm.

"You already did your tour," Garcia said.

"I'm going to do a second shift," McKnight said.

Kitara paged the Bridge. "Nelson has been transported," she said.

"McKnight, put us on a direct heading to K-7, best speed, now," Garcia said.

"Course and speed laid in," McKnight acknowledged. "Engaging warp drive. Warp one. Warp one point three. Warp one point five. Warp two. Holding steady at warp two."

Garcia called down to Engineering. "Lt. Gomez, once we arrive at K-7, how long will it take you to realign the warp coils?"

"Twenty six hours per coil," Gomez answered.

"Can you do it seven hours?" Garcia asked.

"No sir, I can do it in twenty six, per coil," Gomez said.

"What can you give me in seven?" Garcia asked.

"Nothing," Gomez said. "Once I start tinkering with the alignment, it will take twenty six hours to complete the task. If you can't wait, don't have me start."

"Thank you, Lt," Garcia said, closing the line. "Kitara, report to my ready room."

Garcia decided he was going to have to do something nice for Gomez, because she sounded as if she were not a happy camper. And for good reasons. She had been busy repairing things and acquainting herself with new equipment ever since she transferred to his command. And, he had just fired on the Enterprise, the ship she loved.

"Undine, you have the Bridge," Garcia said.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The IVK SaLing was at K-7 when the New Constitution arrived, waiting and cloaked, per their instructions. The majority of the Path Finder's crew beamed to the SaLing, leaving the Einstein's crew to care for the New Constitution, under Lt. Undine's command, and leaving Lt. Gomez to continue working on repairs. Lt. Undine's instructions were to take the New Constitution back to the Nebula where they had originally recovered the Path Finder, and under the cloak of the nebula, affect repairs to the ship, specifically, realign the warp coils. The Nebula would give them the cover they needed to hide from Star Fleet, the Klingon Fleet, and the Gorn. The Path Finder separated from the New Consitution and moved out of the major traffic lane.

Garcia beamed to the SaLing, and arrived on the transporter pad where he was met by Kletsova.

"You got him?" Garcia asked, stepping down.

"It wasn't hard," Kletsova said. "He came to Earth with us on the Enterprise from Iotia, from there he caught a long range shuttle to Starbase 7, and from there he had boarded a tourist ship that would have taken him almost all the way to Ferengi space."

"Where is he?" Garcia asked.

"In the Brig," Kletsova said. "He was not cooperating."

"Thanks," Garcia said. "Report back to the Path Finder for now."

"Aye," Kletsova said.

Garcia saw her transport away and then went to the Brig to see his kidnapped victim. The Ferengi was pacing as Garcia entered. He stopped pacing when he saw Garcia and then his mouth dropped and he began to back away in fear.

"Oh, please, don't kill me," Brock said.

"Brock, my old friend," Garcia said, turning off the force field to the cell. "Surely you know me better than that by now. I'm not going to kill you."

Brock swallowed. "What do you want with me?"

"I'm interested in starting a business relationship," Garcia said.

Brock's ears perked up. "Really?"

"I need a lot of capital and I need it fast," Garcia said. He handed Brock a Federation PADD. "This is the contract that I've written up and signed. All you have to do is agree and then get to work on my behalf."

Brock grabbed the PADD and began to read. His eagerness quickly began to dissolve. "This is not a fair contract," Brock argued. "We need to change some of the terms."

"That's the deal. I've allowed a small margin for you to collect personal profits," Garcia said.

"Very small," Brock said.

"You will get bonuses when you have reached your quota," Garcia said.

"I'll just be breaking even distributing your music on the Ferengi Alliance Network," Brock argued.

"But you will also be managing my accounts and I'm sure you will manipulate the interest rates in our favor," Garcia said. "I will also agree to do concerts, which is pure profit for us. In addition to that, something that is not in the contract, I want to enter the Black Market. Specifically, I want to deal in ships and arms."

"I don't do Black Market weapons," Brock protested.

Garcia looked at the Ferengi skeptically.

"I mean I use to dabble a little, but there was a lot of stress," Brock said.

Garcia merely continued to gaze at the Ferengi.

"Alright, what do you want to buy or sell?" Brock asked, his shoulders slumping.

"I have Klingon ship, Vorchia class, that I am interested in selling to the highest bidder," Garcia said.

"Really?!" Brock said, starting to estimate his percentage of the profits. "I could retire and buy a mansion on a beach on Ferenginar!"

"So, do we have a working relationship?" Garcia asked.

"I'd rather have a contract," Brock said.

"You're holding one," Garcia said.

Brock looked over the contract again. "I need more time to look over this," Brock complained.

"I need a decision from you now. I can always find another Ferengi, but I thought I would give you first go since you and I know each other," Garcia said.

"Alright, alright," Brock said, putting his finger print on the PADD's biometric reader. "Deal. I will need an office."

"Your personal quarters and office have been prepared," Garcia said. "Get to work. I want a large sum of credits in that account before fifteen hundred hours. I'm depending on you to make me look obscenely wealthy and eccentric."

"I can do that," Brock assured him. "I mean, that's part of the game. The wealthier you look the more wealth you attract. You won't regret this."

After escorting Brock to his quarters on the SaLing, with an adjoining room that was to be his office, he introduced him to Losira, who was to help him make his office and quarters more comfortable. From there he logged into the Losira computer system via his implant and had himself transported with the Path Finder's transporters from where he stood in the corridor of the SaLing directly over to space station, Deep Space K-7. He arrived in a corridor away from the station's customs officials and proceeded towards a bar to meet his next contact. As he walked, he found the corridor unusually quiet and slowed his pace. He finally stopped and contacted Kitara using his implant.

"Kitara," Garcia messaged. "Are you on the Path Finder?"

"Affirmative," Kitara responded, her voice translating into words that scrolled text that only Garcia could see. "We've disengaged from the New Constitution on arrival, as per your instructions, and are awaiting further orders. The New Consitution has collected the supplies you had pre-orderd and are on their way to their assigned check point."

"Do a scan of the station and look for anything unusual. Also, establish communications with the station authorities and see if everything is normal," Garcia said.

"Stand by," Kitara said. "Sookanan is contacting the station management. Is there something wrong?"

"Intuition," Garcia said. "I'm probably just being paranoid, but I got that 'something bad is about to happen' feeling."

"Shall I join you?" Kitara asked.

"No," Garcia said. "It's probably nothing."

He began to walk slowly.

“K-7 management claims everything is normal,” Kitara said. “They seem a bit stressed if you ask me. Scans reveal nothing unusual. I’m coming over.”

“No, just stay there and stay hot,” Garcia said. He reached under his pancho and retrieved two Orbs from his pocket. He held them out and concentrated. “Duana, Ilona, I need you.”

The orbs lifted from his hand and flew back. His mental companions Duana and Ilona suddenly appeared. Duana was dressed in shades of black, with black boots, mini skirt, and tight blouse, an outfit that wouldn’t be complete without a leather overcoat. All she lacked were some weapons. Ilona was dressed similarly, but in shades of white.

“It’s about time,” Ilona complained. She took in a deep breath of air. “Oh my god, that is so refreshing.”

Duana pressed up against Garcia. “Tactile sensations. This is absolutely wonderful,” she said.

“Follow me,” Garcia said, and proceeded down the corridor to the bar.

His girls followed him and they entered the bar, passing under and through a weapon detection portal. A Klingon band was playing something akin to old Earth’s punk rock song and the way they were playing solidified Garcia’s feelings that something was wrong. They were not really into their music. He spied the table of Klingons he was coming to visit and proceeded forward. As he passed a certain table, the occupants got up, revealing themselves to be Gorn in sheep’s clothing. Their hoods and coats slid to the floor as they rose. There were ten of them and they wasted no time drawing weapons. Garcia grabbed the weapon arm of the first one and spun in towards the Gorn’s chest, a dangerous move considering all the Gorn had to do now was grasp him in a bear hug and kill him, but the maneuver offered some protection from getting shot by the other Gorn. Garcia’s girls spread out and began to attack. The occupants of the nearby tables took this opportunity to flee.

Garcia forced his Gorn into shooting one of its companions. The gun made a horrific noise, proving itself to be a projectile weapon of some sort, not an energy weapon. In fact, the weapon was a miniature rail-gun that propelled lumps of gold atoms to near relativistic speeds. The cluster of gold penetrated almost anything, including Klingon armor, and traveled so fast through the body that it cauterized the wound as it made its way through. And often the clumps separated in the air to become two or three objects, but even a single gold atom would do damage at the speeds they were traveling. The Gorn that Garcia shot looked as if it had been peppered with rock salt from a shotgun, only the wholes went all the way through to reveal light on the other side. Judging by the pock marks on the far wall, as if a kid had tossed gold glitter against the wall and it had stuck, the weapon had an effective kill range of about six meters, with diminishing returns beyond that. Garcia was going to have to be careful to not harm any non-players, but hopefully the Gorn and their armor would slow the gold down sufficiently it wouldn’t get a second kill. The overhead lights flickered each time a gun went off. In addition to the magnetic pulse noise as the charged up to be fired, there was a small clap of thunder as the gold atoms left the vacuum chamber and collided with the air molecules and immediately decelerated. The smell of ozone filled the air as the gold atoms and air molecules produced static electricity. Lightning and sparks surrounded the projectile as it flew towards the target, giving it the illusion of being a hairy orb of plasma the size of a tennis ball, though in effect, the particles were much smaller.

The other Gorn didn't seem to care if they shot their companions or not, as long as they shot Garcia in the process. One took aim at Garcia, while another shot Ilona directly in the gut. Her wound healed almost immediately, with no apparent stall in her fight. Garcia dropped to the floor and the Gorn he had moved up against took the full shot in its chest. It fell straight to the floor, dead. Had Garcia not rolled towards the table, he would have been trapped under the weight of the dead Gorn. Garcia kicked a chair up towards the Gorn who had just shot at him, which knocked the weapon out of its hand. The Gorn came for Garcia and Garcia rolled under the table and came out on the other side. He kicked the table up and over and stood, grabbing the table by the legs and rammed it into the Gorn that had most recently shot at him. He turned to meet another that was trying to come around the table, hitting it with the table as well. That Gorn grabbed the table and ripped it out of Garcia's hand and flung it across the room. The Gorn that had shot at him moved in and tried to grasp him in a hug, but Garcia fell to the floor and swept its legs. No sooner than it hit the floor, Garcia kicked it in the head. He rolled to prevent being grabbed by the other and forced himself back to his feet. He spun and kicked another Gorn in his chest. It was the same as kicking the wall. The Gorn wasn't phased by the kick and in the process was able to grab Garcia's foot. Had Garcia not forced himself to spin as the Gorn twisted his leg, the Gorn would no doubt have broken his leg. As he spun and flew up, Garcia kicked the Gorn in the eye with his other foot. The Gorn let go and Garcia crashed to the floor. Lying there, as the smoky vapor that lined the floor in the bar swirled from being displaced by the wind his body made as it hit the floor, he spied the weapon the Gorn had dropped and reached out to it. Using his telekinetic abilities, he caused the weapon to slide across the floor and come to his hand. He rolled to his back and shot the closest Gorn. The weapon took time to reload and recharge, defined by a starting low pitch whine that went up in pitch until the cycle had completed. Garcia rolled again and shot another Gorn. The last two he shot were still engaged with Garcia's girls, who were holding their own, but not getting an advantage.

That was not completely true. Even though they both shared his brain, they were two different personalities and had different abilities. Duana was a superior fighter to Ilona. Duana's first Gorn had grabbed her by the trench coat. Duana had pulled free of her coat and in the process bound the Gorn with the same coat and took it to the floor, where several kicks to the head rendered it unconscious. Duana had taken out two Gorn by herself, while Ilona had just been holding her own with the one she chose to wrestle with. By the time Garcia had come around to their aid, Duana was assisting Ilona with her fight. The Gorn fought back until Garcia shot it in the leg, dropping it to the floor, where Ilona kicked it in the head, knocking it out.

Garcia stood and brushed himself off, and then helped Ilona to her feet.

"Are you alright, Ilona?" Garcia asked.

"Did you feel that?" Ilona asked him.

"I felt everything," Garcia said. "And had the manifestation orb taken a shot, I think it could have killed you."

"It would kill the orb, but I would still be in your head, right?" Ilona said.

Garcia shrugged, for he simply didn't know. "Is that it?" he asked raising his voice to be heard through out the bar, making sure everyone saw that he was still holding a weapon. It was a nice little Gorn specialty, which might fetch a fair price on the black

market, seeing how it was illegal and all. It's down side was that it was not quite built for the human hand, but rather, for a Gorn hand.

No one at any of the tables said anything or even attempted to make eye contact. They wanted nothing to do with this fiasco. The voice that answered came from the bar.

"Drop your weapon or I will kill your mate and her offspring."

Garcia turned to the Gorn that was speaking. Ilona and Duana took up positions directly behind him and to the left or right of him, making a triad. It was a lone Gorn and he was holding a rifle, a rifle that probably worked on the same principle that his hand held rail gun operated, at the head of a waitress, whose name was Karsat. Her species was Glean and her skin color and texture resembled that of Earth's Poison Dart Frog, with deep purples and reds. He had had a brief encounter with her the last time he was on the station, not quite in his right mind, and a little under the influence of Klingon drink on an empty stomach, and a Kelvan rogue program in his mind. At her feet and in her arms were five little Gleans. He did not remember her having children when they last met, but still, he was too busy calculating the resolution to his problem to make the connection.

"I mean it, drop the weapon," the Gorn insisted. "Or they're all dead."

Garcia shook his head sadly, and then suddenly drew his weapon up and shot the Gorn point blank in the head. It collapsed to the floor.

"Nice shot," Duana said.

"Anyone else?" Garcia asked, directing Duana and Ilona to collect the other rail-guns. Duana retrieved her trench coat first, brushed it off, and put it back on.

"That's it!" Glor said, rising to meet his friend. In fact the whole table of Klingons rose to meet him. The Klingons gathered around him, greeting him enthusiastically with hits to the arm and body slams. N'elent greeted him most affectionately, embracing him and lifting him straight off the floor. She put him down, and bit his neck, drawing blood, which drew laughter from her companions, especially witnessing Garcia's reaction.

"Yeah, and like thank you for the help," Ilona said.

"It wasn't our fight," Glor said. "Besides, Garcia is Klingon. He can handle himself."

"I am not Klingon," Garcia said. "But thank you. We need to talk, but give me a moment."

Garcia went over to the waitress, Karsat. "Are you okay?" he asked her.

Karsat nodded, crying. "I'm sorry. I thought they were fans and I bragged about us being family. It was my fault."

"No," Garcia said. "It was their fault. You are not responsible for the behavior of other people."

Karsat nodded. Duana picked up one of the five kids that were clinging to her leg. "They look like pets."

"They are not sentient at this stage of their life," Karsat said. The Glean had an interesting life cycle, not gaining sentience until puberty drove them to be more social. From hatchling to puberty, they were literally no smarter than a feral cat, and about as friendly. "Normally, they would be on their own in the wild, but life on a station requires earlier domestication."

"It looks like you," Duana laughed, holding one up closer to Garcia's face.

"It can't be. The chances of she and I being genetically compatible are astronomical," Garcia said.

"They are ours," Karsat said. "I hold no obligations over you. Do not worry."

Garcia sighed trying to consider the ramifications and the fact that she had just been held hostage with the fact that he did have a moral obligation to aid in the domestication of his offspring if they were indeed his. He quickly came to a resolution.

"Karsat, can you cook?" Garcia asked.

"Yes," Karsat said.

"Klingon foods?" Garcia asked.

"Yes," Karsat answered. "I often help the chef here with the meal preparation. Klingon foods take a lot of work. Even the raw stuff requires ritualistic preparation."

"My ship needs a chef. Would you work for me?" Garcia asked.

Her eyes brightened. "Really?"

Garcia removed his com. badge and handed it to her. "Take this, go and gather all your things and then beam up to the ship. I'm sending them a message now to prepare a room for you and to make it appropriately comfortable. Duana, Ilona, help her with the little ones and then report back here after she has transported over to the SaLing."

Garcia went over to his Klingon friends and sat down, ignoring the station's security as they cleaned up the mess he had made. They seemed most apologetic, which might have explained why they didn't seem interested in collecting the weapons he had confiscated. That or they didn't want a confrontation with a man who could fight off ten Gorn. It now seemed fairly straight forward that the ship that had fled the space battle had come here and left an assault team to ambush him. They would have known he was coming here because they had been monitoring the communications between him and the Enterprise. And, it meant he was going to have to be more careful.

There were new faces at Captain Glor's table, but if Glor had hired them, Garcia could trust them well enough. His friends welcomed him by kicking his chair back. Gowr slid him a drink and N'elent moved herself and her food closer in order to share with him. She sat on his lap.

"So, my friend, how is it to be parasite free?" Gowr asked.

"Oh, bloody hell," Garcia said.

They all laughed at his expense. "I've been treated, if you want to play," N'elent said, pushing a bite of food into his opened mouth.

Garcia frowned, chewed his food, trying to minimize his reaction to N'elent's comment, her proximity, but also trying to hide his reaction to the spicyness of the food. "Maybe later?" he managed to squeak, and his friends roared and slapped the table.

"Your ship received the supplies I had gathered at your request?" Glor asked.

"They did, thank you," Garcia said, avoiding the subject of "play" any further to the amusement of his friends. "I need to buy some weapons. Can you get me in?"

"It is no small favor you ask," Captain Glor said.

"It's not the only favor I'll be asking," Garcia said. "I also would like to buy your services, again. I'm thinking of starting a small war. Further, I have a Klingon ship, Vorcha class, that I would like you to command. If you will do that, perhaps you will consider promoting Gowr to Captain and giving him the Pa Nun. I'm going to need your ship."

"You always bring such amazing adventures to my table," Captain Glor said.

"Can you tell me where I might find the Inyar and her Captain?" Garcia asked.

"He and his ship have no honor. You intend to hire him as well?" Glor asked, anger showing in his face.

"No, I intend to find him and take back something he's stolen," Garcia said.

"Now that, I can help you with," Glor said, his mood changing back to amusement just as easy as it had shifted to discontent. "He can often be found at a pub on Sherman's planet, in a Klingon settlement on the Northern Province."

"His mother was human," Gowr said. "She ran the bar and had a reputation with flirting with the patrons, until a jealous mate killed her."

At the words 'jealous mate' N'elent put more food in Garcia's mouth, eager to fatten him up as well as make sure every one in the bar knew who Garcia belonged to.

"Her son sold the bar and bought a small ship, but he and his possie still frequent the place, and makes casual business acquaintances there," Gowr continued. "He has since gotten a large ship through back stabbings and underhanded deals."

Glor interrupted. "Garcia, we should counsel in private."

"Your place or mine?" Garcia asked.

"The Pa Nun, one hour," Captain Glor said.

Garcia checked his bank account and saw that Brock had done his work quicker than he had imagined. Garcia slid a computer chip over to Captain Glor. Captain Glor slid it back.

"Your credit is good with me," Glor said.

"I know. That's to help get me in the bidding," Garcia said, sliding it back.

"You may have to do an act of service as well," Glor said, pocketing the chip.

"To raise your esteem in the underground. My weight will only take you so far."

"I am prepared to do what I must. This matter is even more important than our previous adventure," Garcia said.

Glor laughed and slapped the table. "By Sto-Vo-Kor, I can't wait. I will see you soon, Captain Garcia."

He called his troops to attention and they left. Gowr hit Garcia again in the arm and N'elent pulled his head back and acted as if she might kiss him again. She held his face securely, staring in his eyes, and then, she bit his lip. "Later, my love," she said, and promptly departed. As Gowr's group was leaving, Duana and Ilona were returning.

"What, did we miss the drinks?" Duana asked.

"You shouldn't drink," Ilona said.

"And why not?" Duana demanded.

"Girls, is it always going to be like this?" Garcia asked.

"As long as we're with you," Ilona said.

(Path Finder, three to beam up,) Garcia sent a text message via his implant.

Kitara received the email from Garcia's implant and complied, beaming the three of them back to Path Finder. The Path Finder had several transporter rooms, but due to the improvements in transporter technology over the years, it really wasn't necessary to have one at all, except for potentially confining non crew members to one area of the ship and potential decontamination purposes. Site to site transport was actually more efficient. Garcia was beamed directly from K-7 to the Bridge of the Path Finder, but could have easily have been beamed directly to anywhere on the ship.

Garcia told what little he had learned of the Inyar to Lt. Kitara and then excused himself to go speak with the Gray Princess, residing in the Path Finder's guest quarters. He was invited in with no issues. The Princess seemed to greet Garcia with the warmth she would an old friend, causing him to wonder just how much his divergent self had indeed shared with her that he may not have learned during the mind meld.

"Have you finished the wormhole gate on the Path Finder?" Garcia asked.

"We have," the Princess said. "With Losira's help, we should soon have the gate on the SaLing up and running. I made you these rings. Those who wear the rings will be able to see the wormhole gates. It will enable you to see all wormhole gates created by the Preservers, or any other cloaked technology they may have left unattended."

Garcia collected the rings, which were about ten.

"They will attune themselves to the first person who wears them," the Princess said. "They will operate for no one else after. I will supply you with more rings as you need them."

"Thank you," Garcia said. "I also want a gateway on the Pa Nun. So have the supplies you need to build it ready. I will transfer the supplies and a drone or two over shortly. By the way, are you well?"

"I am," the Princess said. "But I long to be on a planet, starting my hive."

"I've had Kitara supply me with the planetary records of both our two nations," Garcia said, handing her a PADD. "If you find anything that you like, let me know. We'll check it out. Also, I want you to use the gateway and go through to the New Constitution and talk to your guards. I want them lighten security to include me and my other senior officers into your quarters."

"I will do that," the Princess said.



Garcia paged Kitara to the Path Finder's main shuttle bay. The shuttle bay was cluttered with all the stuff they had stolen from the Einstein before Garcia so neatly destroyed it. Losira was present and speaking with Garcia when Kitara entered and she got to overhear Garcia's instructions to her.

"I need all the serial numbers, markings, and any computer identifier tags that would indicate these were stolen from the Einstein removed. Make them look like they are fresh from stock and have not been appropriately labeled," Garcia said.

"That's a menial task and beneath me," Losira said.

"Are you saying you won't do it?" Garcia asked.

"No, I'm simply protesting," Losira said. "I can process trillions upon trillions of bits of information a second and you're going to have me retag stolen property?"

"It is actually an exercise that demonstrates how versatile and valuable you are," Garcia said. "There were times when this was beyond the abilities of a computer."

"I will not be appeased so easily," Losira said. "But I understand the point. I will have Losira agents on it immediately."

Five more Losira agents appeared and they got to work.

"What's the maximum number of agents you can produce?" Garcia asked.

"It depends on the distance and level of complexity of the task," Losira said. "If you'll excuse me, I will assist them in order to expedite this operation."

"Thank you, Losira," Garcia said.

Losira blew him a kiss.

“She is becoming increasingly more demanding,” Kitara complained.

“She’s bored,” Garcia said. “She’s not being challenged.”

“What did you call me for?” Kitara asked.

Garcia handed her a ring.

“Is this a human proposal of mating?” Kitara asked.

“No,” Garcia said. “It’s a key. Put it on.”

Kitara really didn’t want to play, but she complied. The ring shrunk to fit her finger and she nearly removed it in panic. And then she saw the Gate against the far wall. She approached cautiously, curious about the artifact that had previously been invisible.

“What is it?” Kitara asked. “An illusion?”

“No, that is a Gateway,” Garcia explained. “There is a wormhole connecting the Path Finder to the New Constitution. There will soon be a wormhole connecting the Path Finder to the SaLing. We will now be able to go between the ships, regardless of the distance between us.”

“How is this possible?” Kitara asked.

“It’s Preserver technology,” Garcia said. “I have friends in high places. I’ve given rings to Kletsova, Trini, Rivan, and now you. I will be giving one to Jurak, Undine, Tuer, and plan to give one to Glor and Gowr. No one else has to know. Even though only those with rings will see this technology, we can still lead others through the wormholes as our needs dictate.”

“You have good friends,” Kitara said.

“I am blessed,” Garcia agreed. “I have a meeting with Captain Glor in half an hour. Status report?”

“We’re just awaiting your orders,” Kitara said. “The Inyar was in this system about two days ago. It left on heading that might take it to Orion.”

“Very well. After I depart for the Pa Nun, you should take the Path Finder and follow that lead. But before you do, I want you to leave an Away Team on Sherman’s planet,” Garcia said. “I want twenty four hour surveillance on that bar.”

“It shall be done,” Kitara said. “Captain, I was disappointed you did not include me in the fight with the Gorns. But after seeing the security footage of the fight, I see it was a matter of honor. You fought well.”

“No, I fought like a scared, trapped rabbit,” Garcia said.

“Your companions came in handy after all,” Kitara noted.

“I noticed,” Garcia said. “Might have to keep them.”

“Are you sure you want them exploring the ship?” Kitara said. “They have your access codes. Should I restrict their access?”

“I don’t see the need. They know everything I know,” Garcia said. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get ready for a meeting with Captain Glor.”

Kitara saluted.



Captain Glor greeted Garcia with a hearty laugh and enthusiasm normally reserved for long lost kin. He led him into his quarters and offered him the more comfortable of the two chairs. Garcia recognized several of the trophies on the wall, a plaque from one of the Romulan ship’s he had commandeered during their adventure together. Judging by some of the repairs and upgrades to the Pa Nun, it was no doubt Glor’s most profitable and memorable excursion. One of the trophies was a decahedron,

no doubt one of the Kelvan that Garcia had reduced to essential elements in the fight. He would have to use the Kelvan device to determine who it was, but he was reluctant to tap into that much power just to satiate his curiosity. Had Glor been silent, he might have given in to temptation.

"I've thought about your offer to Captain the SaLing," Glor said. "And I must decline."

Garcia didn't say anything as Glor handed Garcia a drink and then took his seat.

"It is difficult not to think of you as a Klingon," Glor went on. "You should have offered Gowr the position. I suspect you wanted to offer Gowr the position, but you didn't out of respect for me. For that, I thank you. Now, here are the reasons why I must decline. I'm an old warrior. The learning curve for the Vorcha class ship is too big a thing for me. Oh, I could do it, but I would always be playing catch up. I know the Pa Nun. I was born on this ship. I will most likely die on this ship. And I will do so with no regrets. I have had some good runs. I had always thought Gowr would kill me and take command, but he loves me like a brother. And because of his loyalty, I want you to take him. Make him the Captain of the SaLing in this little armada you're putting together. He will serve you well."

"I'm going to need you, too," Garcia said.

"I will be there," Glor promised. He drank hardily from his mug, slammed it down, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

Garcia mirrored this and fought not to choke. Glor laughed and stomped his feet. "Tell me, friend Garcia. Why didn't you put Kitara in charge?"

"She wants to remain my first officer for a time, earn her way to the Captain's seat," Garcia said, leaving out some of the other reasons, like, she needed to be on the Path Finder to maintain a balance of Federation Klingon influence in charge of the ship.

"She will serve you well," Glor said, shaking his head as if he understood and agreed with Kitara's decision to stay first officer. "She has deserved better in the Fleet than she has gotten. I think you will correct that. But enough talk of our immediate social circles. What evils hide waiting for us this time?"

"The worst kind," Garcia said. "People who believe they are patriots have risked toppling our governments by re-inventing banned weapons. Two of these weapons were stolen and I have reason to believe they will soon go on the black market. It is my goal to retrieve these weapons before they can be used."

"What is this weapon?" Glor asked, intrigued.

"They are calling them Starburst this time around," Garcia said. "They're calling it that because detonating it near a star will end all life in a solar system. The original name of the weapon was the Genesis Device."

Glor was about to say something and then stopped. He put his mug down and leaned forward. "This is grave news," Glor said. "Who must I kill? Do these enemies know what they have taken?"

"I don't think so," Garcia said. "Or they wouldn't be trying to sell them, at least, not so quickly and not at the price they're starting the bidding at. I suspect they believe that these are new weapons that are supposed to be capable of taking out a Borg ship. And it's not a simple thing as just firing it at the Borg. As soon as the weapon is deployed you have to warp out of the blast radius, or you're just as dead as your victim."

"I can not get you into the circle to buy arms, but I know someone who can," Glor said. "I have bought weapons from this man before and though I trust him as far as I can throw him, if he believes you're a sincere buyer, he will get you in. He may ask you to perform a task or two to prove your worthiness, but it will be insignificant task for you. The only challenge will be getting this all done before the next meet. Very few are invited to this circle and the meeting place is always different. This contact I have, if he doesn't like you, he will kill you."

"He will try," Garcia corrected.

Glor roared with laughter. He stood and offered Garcia his hand, pulling him out of his chair. "Then we ride again, brother. To our deaths!"

"I'm already dead," Garcia assured him. "I'm just trying to win the game before its over."

"Come, we will tell Gowr he must pack," Glor said.

"One more thing," Garcia said. "Since you are willing to be a part of my armada, your words, not mine, but appropriate, would you allow me to give you a gift?"

"What sort of gift?" Glor asked.

Garcia retrieved a ring and showed it to him. "I have an upgrade I think you might be interested in."



The Pa Nun didn't have a shuttle bay, so it was decided to put the Gateway in the dining hall. They watched the two Grays Garcia had transported over assembled the invisible pieces to the gate. As they watched, they discussed plans and drank blood wine. After Garcia gave Gowr and Glor an overview of his basic plan, which was subject to change at a moment's notice, he was interrupted by a call from his First Officer. Glor and Gowr gave him some privacy and went off to make their own preparations.

"Captain," Kitara called Garcia via his com. badge. "The Enterprise will be arriving shortly."

"Thanks," Garcia said. "Stay cloaked and wait here for the rest of your friends to arrive. As soon as they do, you should be on your way to Orion. I'm going with Glor to meet with someone. I'll contact you when I when I'm done."

"Aye, Captain," Kitara said.

If there wasn't so much riding on him having a successful meet with Glor's contact, he would not have been so willing to leave the Path Finder to Kitara. Though he trusted her, he didn't want to leave his new ship. But, he surrendered to the moment and trusted things to work out. With nothing else to do, he decided to go to the guest quarters which he had used the previous time he was on the Pa Nun. He was almost to his quarters when someone leaped out of a dark recess, grabbed him, and shoved him up against the wall. His hands instantly went to the attacker's throat, but he eased up on his grip when he saw who it was.

"So, you are ignoring me now?" N'elent asked.

"I've been busy," Garcia said.

"Too busy for this?!" N'elent said, pounding him against the wall using her body weight.

Garcia broke her hold and shoved her up against the other wall. "The last time we played, you infected me," Garcia said.

"We tracked the infection down to me eating wild heart of targ, and we will not be buying from that supplier again," N'elent said, leaving Garcia to wonder if the man was dead already or would be dead the next time she ran across him.

N'elent grasped a conduit and brought her legs up to shove Garcia away, her legs pushing against his stomach. They felt the Pa Nun jump to warp. Garcia twisted and pushed in close to her. Her legs hugged him. She let go of the conduit and put her arms around him, dragging the back of his shirt up as she clawed at his back. She kissed him hard on the mouth, bit his lip, and then his neck.

"Who were these whores I saw you with on K-7?" N'elent asked.

"Just my imaginary friends," Garcia said.

"You have some imagination," N'elent said.

"So I've been told," Garcia said.

"Tell me you missed me," N'elent said.

Garcia was silent. N'elent put her feet on the floor and tried to get out of his hug. He held tighter and she put an elbow into his chest and pushed hard.

"Ouch," Garcia said, and maneuvered in a way that he trapped her arm so she couldn't hurt him but also couldn't get away. "You want me to lie to you?"

"No," N'elent said, angry. "I want you to let me go."

"You started this," Garcia said.

"I thought you wanted me," N'elent said.

"I do," Garcia said.

"Did you even think about me?" N'elent asked.

"Yes," Garcia said. "But that's not the same as missing you. I've been busy."

N'elent stopped struggling to get away. "How often?"

"What?" Garcia asked.

"How often did you think of me?" N'elent asked.

"I can't quantify that," Garcia said. "Look, I'm just here for a short while. If you want to spend time with me, great. If you don't, I understand that, too. If you're expecting a monogamous relationship and a family, I can't offer you that. I'm just trying to survive from day to day and I'm not in a position to offer anyone a commitment. Hell, at the rate I'm going, I'll be dead this side of a week."

"Don't want a family, eh?" N'elent said, turning to look at him. "Then what's with taking in the waitress and her pups?"

"The Gorn just took her as a hostage to get to me," Garcia said. "I couldn't leave her there and chance them coming back for her and her offspring. I owe her that much."

"She dug her own hole," N'elent said. "She was bragging about her time with you and that those were your kids. And more than that, she could have been on the pill."

"Yeah. I could have been on the pill as well," Garcia said. "I'm just as much responsible for the results as she. And, guess what, it complicates my life that much more, and now that you're aware of the complications, you have a choice. You can avoid attacking me in the corridors or you can finish what you started."

N'elent pushed him away. Garcia pushed her back. She swung at him and he blocked her punch and tried to trap her arm but she maneuvered out and got a hit in with her other hand. He backed up to avoid getting hit as she continued to swing with both arms. She came at him faster and more furious and he accepted a few more blows to the head just to step inside and grab her. He spun her about and pushed her up into the wall,

twisting her arm into her back to the point of almost breaking it, her head pressed cheek first into the wall. She grunted in discontent, unable to break free, breathing heavy.

"That's enough," Garcia snapped. "I'm not a Klingon. I don't want to play any more. Just walk away."

He eased up on her arm intending to back away and she shoved him back and then kicked at him. He caught her foot and shoved her hard against the wall and then hit her in the face. She seemed dazed, but not badly hurt. Garcia walked away. He opened the door to his quarters, making the mistake of turning his back to her. She hit him in the back and then in the kidney. He turned to block her next hit and took her to the floor. The door closed to his quarters.



The Pa Nun and the SaLing had departed K-7, jumping to warp simultaneously. They traveled at warp six for ten hours and came out of warp in interstellar space, with no specific landmarks to mark the region as particularly important. The coordinates landed them in the black, tens of thousands of light years from the nearest star. The only significant items for thousands of kilometers was a piece of plastic polymer mesh that must have fallen off a ship and a plastic container that may have held a liquid soap for cleaning clothes. Other than logging the artifacts, they paid them no mind. Glor had the Pa Nun decloaked and then they waited. Twenty five minutes later another ship arrived. Whoever the owner was, he was not afraid to have an Orion pirate flag painted to the side of his ship, and it was obviously well maintained. This ship hailed the Pa Nun. Garcia was on the Bridge to witness the exchange, rubbing his jaw. No one commented about his bruises. The Pa Nun answered the hail and the smiling face of an Andorian appeared on the screen. The Andorian appraised Captain Glor.

"Captain Glor," the Andorian said. "Are you in need of supplies so soon?"

"I have a friend," Glor said. "I mentioned him to you the last time I bought supplies. He would like to join the ring. I personally vouch for him."

The Andorian nodded, appreciatively. "If you vouch for him, he must be okay. But I will want to meet him."

"He wants to put in a bid at the next sessions," Glor said. "As do I. Rumors say you have something hot."

"Indeed," the Andorian said. "I think the hot stuff may be out of your price range, though, unless you've been holding back on me all these years. Still, you are welcome in the circle. When can I meet this friend of yours?"

"We'll beam over now, if you wish," Captain Glor said.

"You know my rules," the Andorian said. "Make sure he abides."

The Andorian terminated the transmission. Glor got up and motioned Garcia to follow him.

"No weapons," Glor said, and started stripping himself of his hidden weapons as they entered the transporter room. "Not even a Dagger."

Garcia started removing his own hidden weapons, and the two of them together started making a game out of it, seeing who had the most weapons and who had the better concealment. Glor won on the amount of weapons and variety, but he was particularly fascinated with something Garcia had.

"May I have this?" Glor asked.

“Sure. Can I take my personal body guards?” Garcia asked, setting the two Orbs down on the weapons locker.

“The two girls you came and kicked ass with on K-7?” Glor asked. “Or the one that recently beat the crap out of you? No. This will be just you and me. I know the ladies are preferable, but surely you’re not afraid to die with an old Klingon, are you?”

“Let’s go,” Garcia said. As they stepped up on the pad, Garcia added: “If he does kill me, don’t protest. Stay alive and find these weapons.”

Glor hit Garcia in the arm and laughed. “I will tell him that you paid me in advance to bring him and that you knew the risk. He will believe that.”

They stepped up on the transporter pad and N’elent transported them over to the other ship. On the Orion pirate ship they were greeted by three men with weapons. They might have been Humans or Other Klingons, but it was hard to tell which without a tricorder. A fourth person stepped up and started taking scans with what appeared to be a stolen, Star Fleet issue tricorder.

“No weapons on them,” the man said. “No, wait. You have some sort of implant. This is a violation. Turn it off.”

“It’s a neural regulator, can’t you tell that with your tricorder?” Garcia said, thinking the man truly didn’t know how to use all its features.

“I don’t care,” the man argued.

“You should,” Captain Glor said. “It keeps his brain chemistry balanced. If he turns it off, he’ll go berserk, foam at the mouth, and kill everyone in sight. And when he’s berserk, he’s immune to stun weapons.”

The man with the tricorder considered this. “Alright, but no transmissions.”

They were led to a chamber that resembled a throne room. There were guards, no fewer than ten, a number of Orion Slave Girls, some dancing and some reclining on pillows, and the Andorian in a chair, being hand fed grapes by one of his slaves. When he saw Garcia he rose suddenly, spilling the plate of food. He stepped forwards, signaling his men to come closer, weapons at ready.

“You bring a Star Fleet spy on board my ship and expect to live?” the Andorian demanded.

“Bliss, this man is trustworthy,” Glor said. “He and I have fought together in battle. He is loyal to me. And you only have to read the news to know he’s on the most wanted list. Besides, he has money. That’s all you care about.”

“I am always amazed that you seem to know so little about me, Glor,” Bliss said. “Klingons are very narrow minded, Garcia. It’s not about money. It’s about power. There isn’t a thing in the Universe that I could want that can’t be supplied by a replicator. But there is still one commodity that no money can buy or replicator can create and that is people. People, living flesh, slavery, is the last, great commodity, with weapons being a close second, and only because governments restrict them, making them profitable.”

Bliss pushed a button on his belt and an Aenar entered the room. Aenar were Andorians, their skins white as snow, but other than that, indistinguishable biologically speaking from their blue counterparts, with two exceptions. All Aenar are blind. And they are all extremely strong telepaths. Bliss waved her closer, for though she was blind, she was quite aware of her surroundings, perhaps even more so than a sighted person. She seemed to be looking right at Garcia, maneuvering around the slave girls on the floor as if she had memorized their floor positions.

Garcia could see Glor was considering the tactical situation and planning his attack. Glor's eyes met Garcia, trying to communicate his intentions, but Garcia subtly shook his head, no.

"What is this ones intention?" Bliss asked.

"He wants to make a name for himself," the Aenar said. "He likes publicity."

"But what does he want here with me?" Bliss demanded.

"He doesn't care about you," the Aenar said. "You're a means to an end. He wants to acquire something called a Starburst. He thinks it'll make him even more famous than he already is. He is completely egocentric, self serving, spoiled, and any other adjectives you can conjure up that come with being a child prodigy and celebrity. That and he is bored. He's looking for challenges worthy of his skills."

"How does he know about the Starburst?" Bliss asked.

"Ask him," she said.

Bliss turned to Garcia, expecting an answer. "I confiscated the personal data banks of a Klingon Admiral," Garcia answered.

Bliss looked to his Aenar slave. She nodded.

"You understand, I don't trust you," Bliss said. "What are you bringing to the table besides credit?"

"Two hundred Star Fleet issue photon torpedoes," Garcia said.

"Nice," Bliss said, whistling. His enthusiasm increased with the promise of weapons. "With the arming codes?"

"They wouldn't be good without codes, now would they?" Garcia said.

"And how did you acquire these?" Bliss asked.

"I stole them off the USS Einstein during a rescue operation," Garcia said.

"If you have so much animosity against Star Fleet, why would you rescue them?" Bliss asked.

"I never said I have animosity towards Star Fleet," Garcia said.

"He wouldn't mind revenge against Fleet for ending his career before he has made a name for himself," the Aenar answered her master's unasked question.

"Look, I had recently stolen a Star Fleet vessel and was in need of some weapons when this opportunity made itself available. I rescued a few, poor Star Fleet and managed to raise my esteem with the general public, and at the same time, liberated some weapons in the process," Garcia said. "You can check it out on the news. The Einstein was damaged by a Gorn attack requiring an evacuation of the ship until repairs could be made. While enroute to K-7, where I had intended to drop the Einstein crew off, I had my personal crew steal supplies from the Einstein."

"You know they are bound to figure out what happened," Bliss said.

"At the time, I was figuring I would be light years away," Garcia said.

"Yes, but all they have to do is report them stolen and every Star Fleet ship that comes in range of the torpedoes can disable them with a security lock out," Bliss said.

"They won't find out," Garcia assured him.

"And what makes you so certain," Bliss asked.

"During the rescue, I was attacked by four other Gorn ships, of which I destroyed three. I used the Einstein as a projectile, destroying it and one of the Gorn ships. There is no evidence that anything was stolen," Garcia said. "All of this can be verified. The Enterprise witnessed the battle and reported the destruction of the Einstein to Star Fleet."

They arrived shortly after the battle and tried to arrest me. I fired at the Enterprise and disabled her and was able to escape. It's all public record."

Bliss looked to the Aenar who confirmed Garcia's version of the story.

"This all just sounds too good to be true," Bliss said.

"As I have said, I have fought with Garcia in battle," Glor said. "He is not boasting about his kills, but rather stating a fact."

"Judging by his bruises, I would say he has more to learn about fighting. What else do you have to trade?" Bliss asked.

"I might consider trading the SaLing, which I captured in battle," Garcia said.

"A Vorcha class Klingon ship?!" Bliss said, extremely excited and yet, skeptical.

"Where do you think I learned about the Starburst weapons? I was going through Admiral Sheaar's personal database, which he left behind when he fled," Garcia said.

"And you want to give up this prize?" Bliss asked, skeptically.

"It's too hot for me to keep," Garcia said. "Every Klingon in the Empire is looking for it. It requires a large crew, maintenance, and operational costs which are a little more time consuming than I want to deal with. If I don't get a good trade for it, I suppose I'll just fly it till it breaks and then blow it up."

Even with the Aenar confirming the story, Bliss just couldn't believe it.

"May I use your communicator?" Glor asked.

Bliss nodded and handed Glor his communicator. "Gowr, turn off the cloak."

Outside, the SaLing made its presence known. Alarm klaxons began to blare inside the Orion Pirate ship and Bliss was contacted by his first officer. Bliss ordered his people to do nothing. He tried to hide his feelings of anxiety, but failed to do so. Glor handed the communicator back to Bliss.

"Please, if I wanted you dead you would be dead already," Garcia said. "But I don't want you dead. I want to play. And I'm accustomed to playing with the big boys. Pull up a profile on me. You'll see I never do anything small."

"You have my attention, Tammis Garcia," Bliss said, and went and sat down.

Though the Aenar was blind, she turned to keep her face towards her master. "I would personally be interested in buying the SaLing. I think I might risk bringing you into the ring for that alone. But, I have a standard policy that I must adhere to. All new comers have to do me a favor."

"I was told that might be the case," Garcia said.

"Good. I want you to go to Cardassia prime and steal two, wild, breeding pair of Loraxes from their forest reserve in the northern province of Ilar," Bliss said. "Bring them back, alive, in stasis if you have to, and you're in."

Garcia didn't look happy, but he didn't say no, or otherwise protest. Bliss turned to his slave Aenar to get a better read of the expression that had briefly moved across Garcia's face.

"Garcia is angry. He doesn't know what Loraxes are, but he knows about the Cardassian forest reserves and suspects that you ask the impossible. You might as well ask him to go to Kronos and steal Gowron's beating heart. He's wondering if all of this is worth it and perhaps he should go play elsewhere."

Bliss laughed. "You have a Vorcha class war ship with you. I think you can do this small task," Bliss said. "One more thing, when you finish this, and I am sure you will, when you come to the ring to trade and barter, bring the data files you have on the

Starburst weapons. It will make the bidding so much more fun when people know what they're actually bidding for."

"Very well," Garcia said. "I'll rendezvous back here in twelve days with the Loraxes."

"I can't wait," Bliss said. "I have sent people to collect these creatures for my personal zoo maybe a half a dozen times now, and no one ever comes back. Spy or not, if you can accomplish this, you're alright in my book. Dismissed."

They were led away and transported back to the Pa Nun. No sooner than their feet hit the floor, Glor laughed heartily.

"I thought we were dead when he brought in that stinking telepath," Glor said.

"So did I," Garcia said, retrieving his items from the weapons locker before following Glor out of the transporter room and down the corridor. "Fortunately, she and I have met. Her name is Kors."

"Really?" Glor said, impressed.

"She taught me how to ice skate and she was the first girl I ever kissed," Garcia said.

Glor punched Garcia in the arm. "No wonder we're still alive."

"I hope you're not too attached to your friend, Captain," Garcia said. "When this is through, I am going to rescue Kors, free the slaves, and then I'm going to kill Bliss."

"Good," Glor said. "I never liked him anyway."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Garcia activated the Gateway on the Pa Nun and dialed in the coordinates for the Path Finder. The outer circumference spun, locks engaged, and an iris opened to reveal the glimmering quantum flux of the gateway. He had heard of portals like this before, but had never used one. Kirk had used one to step back through time, on a planet whose population was escaping into the past because their sun was dying in the present, only, unlike Garcia's Gateway, the other end of the wormhole was not fixed to a gate and could be moved to other locations and times. How that species had figured out time travel before warp drive was a mystery that wouldn't be resolved now that their planet was gone due to their star going nova, unless someone were to travel back through time to do better research than Kirk had. Was this another example of Preserver intervention, or perhaps Aahla's people? Aahla and her people didn't seem to care about such localized time travel, time travel restricted to one planet's history, especially when that planet and its species had no future impact on the Universe at large. That planet was considered to be a dead end from an evolutionary stand point. The citizens had been saved, in the sense that they got to live out the remainder of their lives in the past, but their solution was not a way to perpetuate the species since the people returning to the past were preconditioned so they couldn't return to the future, and they were convinced not to alter the past for fear of creating paradoxes. All its literature and technology were lost forever, unless again, someone was to travel back to do some research. Something that Spock may have done, Garcia remembered, for he seemed to recall a tangent where Spock had sired a son on that planet. What was Spock's girl friend's name? Zarabeth?

The Guardian of Time was a similar portal that led through time, only it could take you to the future or the past of any number of planets in the known Galaxy. Its gateway resembled an imperfect circle, as if time and gravity were causing the device to sag. Picard had found a planet with a wormhole gateway, an actual Iconian artifact, and had nearly escaped to another planet with no way to return, but at the last moment, the cyclic nature of the gate allowed him to step through to a closer destination, a Romulan ship. In truth, wormhole technology of this sort was a more convenient and safer technology than a Starship, at least, as far as the Iconian's were concerned. They were considered to be "demons of air and darkness" stepping from planet to planet as easily as crossing from room to room. Star Fleet might have had a chance to study it, had Picard not blown up the only known Gateway to still be operating. He had done so in order to prevent the Romulans from gaining access to it, but still, that technology was light years ahead of even the theoretical possibility of using transporters to go from one planet to another.

Garcia tentatively approached his personal Gateway, touched the fluid's surface membrane and found only a slight tingling sensation and a slight suction suggesting a pressure gradient on the other side. Since it wasn't unpleasant, he boldly stepped through the Gateway for the first time, deciding it was better to just jump in to a cold swimming pool than to wade in. He found himself instantaneously standing in the Path Finder's shuttle bay. He disengaged the wormhole and the luminescent membrane snapped off like a monitor that had had its power disconnected. He touched the wall beyond the ring, the color of which accentuated the gates presence, giving it a surreal, psychedelic appearance. Solid.

Garcia departed the shuttle bay and tapped his communicator badge. "Number One, would you and Jurak meet me in Sick Bay."

Garcia arrived first and started work on some of his 'Klingon Romantically induced' wounds. Kitara caught him using the deep tissue regenerator, working on a kidney, when she entered. Kitara didn't ask him about his injuries or if he were alright, but Doctor Jurak was obligated to do so, taking time to read his bio signs.

"Were you in a fight?" Jurak asked.

"Doctor," Kitara said, lowering Garcia's collar a bit. "Surely you've seen these wounds before."

Jurak laughed. "I must be getting old. I forget how 'young' people are."

"Alright," Garcia said, flashing a warning look at Kitara, who simply returned a knowing smile. "Have your friends arrived?" Garcia asked.

"They have," Kitara said. "We'll be arriving at Orion in six hours."

"Why didn't you use the transwarp?" Garcia asked.

"I chose not to," Kitara said, not really wanting to go into detail about her reluctance to use the transwarp. Part of her dislike of the transwarp stemmed from her own superstitions of the device, but also she did not want to ask Losira to navigate, and why make the crew sick if it wasn't necessary?

"Very well," Garcia said. "Have your friends take their gear and report to the shuttle bay, they'll be assigned to permanent SaLing duty for now. Jurak, you and I will also be going to the SaLing."

"I'm going with you?" Jurak asked.

"Yes. You and I are going hunting," Garcia said.

Both Jurak and Kitara were surprised.

Garcia explained "In order to get me in the ring to bid on the Starburst, Glor's contact requires me to catch two breeding pair of Loraxes. He wants them alive for his personal zoo."

"Not an easy task," Jurak said.

"I know, I looked them up. They're like Earth's T-rexes, only miniature versions," Garcia said. "They'll fit in the SaLing's shuttle bay, but we may need to sedate them to prevent them from hurting themselves."

"Oh, catching them isn't the problem," Jurak said. "Getting them out of the Cardassian reserves is the problem. They have sensors looking for transporter beams and energy weapons in an effort to prevent poaching."

"I know. We'll figure that part out when we get there," Garcia said, putting away the medical tools he was using. "Gather what you think you will need and meet me in the shuttle bay. We leave in an hour. Number One, walk with me."

Kitara followed Garcia as he headed towards his quarters, expecting to be chastised for not using the Transwarp Drive.

"If you don't find the Inyar at Orion, I want you to head at maximum warp to the New Constitution, using the SaLing skin. I don't want the Einstein's crew to know about our gateways, yet," Garcia said.

"At what point will you let them know?" Kitara asked.

"I don't know," Garcia said. "It depends on a number of things. Collect all of the Path Finder's crew, except Lt. Undine and Gomez. If the repairs are finished, I want them in play. Have them go to Sherman's planet and have them await further orders."

Also, educate Undine and Gomez about the gateway and tell them if they need to contact you, they can send a messenger through, or a transmission. Contact me via the same system. No more messages are to be sent via subspace communications, except those that we might use to confuse an enemy that might be listening. That, and to contact superiors, or any other info we might want to be public to boost our esteem.”

“I understand,” Kitara said.

“While you’re at Orion, I want you to discreetly inquire into the Orion ship manufacturing records for an Orion Interceptor class starship. It’s currently christened the Reson, a pirate ship under the command of Bliss Amans, an Andorian collector of rare animals and a slave trader. His ship is too well maintained for there not to be some sort of paper trail, for parts or upgrades. If by any chance you find the Reson, follow it. He has to have a base of operation somewhere. You don’t collect animals of that sort he’s asking me to capture without having a place to put them.”

“The Inyar takes priority over that?” Kitara asked.

“Of course,” Garcia said. “Finding the missing Starburst is paramount. Finding and tracking the Reson is a personal tangent for me. If I’m successful at Cardassia, Bliss and I are scheduled to meet there in twelve days. If I’m not successful, or, specifically, get captured or killed, you are to hunt down that ship and rescue the slaves. Especially a telepath named Kors.”

“I understand,” Kitara said.



In order to avoid the transporter detection sensors, Garcia and Jurak were set down outside of the forest reserve. They had a bit of a hike ahead of them, and they had to lug packs, but they both were enjoying the hike and nature. Gowr had wanted to join them on the hunt, but Garcia had convinced him to stay on the ship, ready for whatever was to come. Both Garcia and Jurak wished they had had the Path Finder’s superior surveillance technology in order to gather intelligence while at Cardassia, but that technology was best utilized in searching for the missing Starbursts. They slung their packs and headed deeper into the bush, using their orienteering skills, a map, and a compass, as opposed to high tech equipment that might be easily detected by the sensor array looking for poachers. A half hour into their walk, Garcia pulled out some sun screen from a vest pocket and started applying it. The Cardassian sun was more brutal than Earth’s and he could only endure it for so long without protection.

Jurak broke the silence. “Captain, would you be inclined to do me a favor?”

“Depends on the favor,” Garcia said.

“The next time you kill a Gorn, would you provide me with the cadaver in order to perform a dissection?” Jurak asked. “I am especially interested in their eyes. I want to better understand that evil stare, beyond what I can read about it from a textbook.”

“It’s not an evil stare,” Garcia said.

“If they were just animals, I might be inclined to agree,” Jurak said. “There are lots of ambush predators that might seem like they’re evil, but they are just doing what they are genetically programmed to do. The Gorn, however, are sentient and opportunistic. They don’t come at you straight, like a Klingon. That’s evil.”

“Not evil, just a different cultural variation of war, which probably does stem from a biological function or evolutionary quirk,” Garcia argued.

“Have you ever heard one laugh? It’s an evil laugh, very dark, underhanded, sneaky, full of undertones of malice,” Jurak said.

“That is how humans interpret their laughter,” Garcia said. “But that might just be a human biological bias, not an accurate perception. I’m thinking I would like you to make up a batch of anti nausea medicines, like dramaine, and store it around the ship for crew to use when we use the transwarp drive.”

“The Klingons will not use drugs,” Jurak said. “The symptoms fade with time and are not severe enough to warrant medical intervention. It is like being seaksick.”

“I don’t like my crew being sick,” Garcia said. “And if we ever came out in a fight, I need my crew to be on their top game.”

“I suspect if we come out of transwarp in the middle of a fight, the seriousness of the situation, heightened awareness, will distract the crew from being sick,” Jurak said. Jurak stopped and grabbed Garcia’s arm to force him to stop his forward motion. A serpent was about to cross their path, and Jurak wasn’t about to tolerate the serpents presence. He retrieved a cutlass and prepared to hack it in two.

Garcia stayed his hand.

“It’s just a serpent,” Jurak protested.

“We didn’t come here to kill serpents,” Garcia said. “It has a biological role to play in this ecology.”

“The only good serpent is a dead serpent,” Jurak argued. “They infest every planet I have ever set foot on which means there are more of them than me and one less won’t make a difference.”

“It does make a difference,” Garcia said. “And the reason they’re on every planet is because the serpents form is one of the primary forms that is extremely successful in terms of locomotion from an evolutionary point of view.”

The serpent had wandered off in a new direction while they argued, making the point about killing it mute. Jurak sheathed his cutlass.

“Besides, I wasn’t just killing it for the sake of killing it,” Jurak moped. “It would have made a nice snack.”

“Come on,” Garcia said, picking up the pace. “We’re burning day light.”

It took them two hours of walking to reach the fence to the forest reserve. It took another hour studying it before they approached, looking for sensors and a potential way through without tripping alarms. Fortune provided them an option for crossing through: they discovered a fresh tunnel going under the fence as they walked the peremiter. They examined it cautiously, looking for signs of an animal that might have dug it.

“Look,” Jurak said, pointing out a boot print. “Cardassians.”

“Probably poachers,” Garcia said, pulling out binoculars to better scan the area. “We need to be on our guard. I’ll go first.”

Jurak stayed his arm. “I’ll go first. You’re the Captain.”

“That’s why I’ll go first,” Garcia said.

“Kitara warned me you might steal all the glory,” Jurak said. “I’ll go first and signal you if it is safe for you to follow.”

“I said, I will go first,” Garcia said.

“You shouldn’t be here at all,” Jurak argued. “We’re taking a risk just letting you come on this mission.”

“We’re stealing animals and I can’t justify letting someone else break the law just to keep me out of trouble,” Garcia said. “I will do my own dirty work, thank you.”

“And that is why I will go first, to keep you safe to do the work that no one else should,” Jurak said.

“Fine, lead on,” Garcia said.

“Thank you,” Jurak said, flashing a smile of victory.

Jurak entered the tunnel head first and pushed through to the other side. Garcia passed their gear over and then joined him. They took time to assemble their weapons, which resembled high powered sniper rifles. The weapons fired smart darts that would enable them to track their prey, attain bio readings, and deliver a sedative on command.

“Let’s split up,” Garcia said. “Try not to get yourself eaten.”

“And if we encounter these poachers?” Jurak asked

“Sedate them,” Garcia said. “We can alert the authorities on our way out. Meet you back here in three hours if you haven’t tagged your specimens. If you get our quota, radio me and the ship to transport us out.”

Jurak nodded and moved off. Garcia went in another direction. For the most part, Garcia kept to the trees, knowing that his prey preferred open spaces to hunt, returning to the protection of the forest only for shelter from the sun and a place to sleep. He followed a stream towards an open patch, where sun filtered down through the trees to light small, flowering bushes. Hearing noises ahead, he fell to the ground and crawled up to the clearing to observe. There was a Lorax on the ground, dead, with a number of Cardassians gutting it. Tied to a tree across the way was a Cardassian forest ranger, being abused by one of the six poachers.

Garcia quietly folded down a stand from his weapon, flipped open his scope and started to plan the sequence he would use to take out the poachers. He decided to take out the person abusing the ranger first, even though it would no doubt alert the entire group of his presence, giving them time to return fire. At the last second, he stayed his hand when a Lorax burst into the clearing. The Poachers scrambled for cover, opening fire on the beast. Garcia took out the poachers one by one and then fired a round into the Lorax, activating the sedative to drop it.

Drawn by the cries of the Lorax, eight more Lorxes appeared out of nowhere. They roared and hissed at the poachers, brushed their heads against their fellow Loraxes on the ground, and growled at the forest around them, creating a circle of defense. One of the Loraxes bit through a poacher. Another turned to the forest ranger, tied to the tree. Garcia dropped it, and tagged the rest of them as they regrouped, looking for a threat. They tightened their circle, roaring, hissing, and clicking in all directions. Garcia shot the ranger with a tag and then signaled Gowr to beam him up.

Garcia tossed his weapon to the floor as he rushed to the transporter controls. He beamed up Jurak and the ranger next.

“Get her to sick bay,” Garcia ordered.

Jurak was quick at recovery, moving from hunting mode to doctor mode with little ‘adjusting’ time. He picked the ranger up and headed for sickbay. Garcia, meanwhile, studied the bio readings, sedated the whole pack of Loraxes, and then beamed up three males and three females, one of which was the Lorax that the poachers had shot at when it came to protect a member of its pack. Garcia left the dead one so that there would be evidence left to prosecute the poachers. No doubt, more rangers were

closing in on the spot, notified of the suspicious activity the moment Garcia transported up.

Garcia tapped his com. badge. "Gowr, get us out of here," Garcia said.

Garcia turned to the female Klingon who had operated the transporter to beam him up. "Your name?"

"Lonette," she answered.

"I need you to go to shuttle bay and secure the Loraxes," Garcia said. "One of them is injured. Render first aid until Jurak gets there."

Lonette saluted and went straight way to her next task. Garcia hustled to the Bridge, paging Jurak as he went. "Jurak, as soon as the ranger is stabilized, there is a Lorax in need of surgery. It has some bullet wounds."

"Aye," Jurak said. "Perhaps you should have left this ranger on the planet."

"From my vantage point, her wounds seemed to require immediate attention," Garcia said. "Enough people have died or been killed on my watch, and I need to bring it back into balance."

"I have her stabilized," Jurak said. "She will live."

"Good job," Garcia said. He stepped off onto the Bridge.

Gowr surrendered the command chair to Garcia. "Admiral," he said, addressing Garcia. "We're being followed by five Cardassian warships."

"They must be tracking the Loraxes. Onlar, inform Jurak that he needs to locate the Cardassian transponders on the beasts and disable them," Garcia said, ignoring the "admiral" bit, a move that would later come to haunt him. His lack of an immediate protest, by Klingon rules of etiquette, means he tacitly agreed to the promotion in status. "Can we go any faster, helm?"

The Klingon female at the helm shook her head. "Warp eight is our maximum speed," she said. "This ship was made for fighting, not running."

"Bora, the Admiral asked if we could go faster, not for an opinion," Gowr snapped.

"Gowr, it's okay," Garcia said. "We just got to figure out how to lose these guys. And what's with the Admiral business?"

"You made me Captain, therefore, you must be the Admiral. There are three ships in the Garcia Armada, which makes you Admiral," Gowr said, thinking the Pa Nun, the SaLing, and the New Constitution the only ships in Garcia's growing fleet.

"Or, bloody hell," Garcia said, and started to protest.

"Sir, there are eight ships that just appeared on short range scans," Bora said. "They're Gorn ships."

"Battle stations," Garcia said.

"Good, finally a battle," Bora said.

"Excuse me?" Garcia asked her.

"We were promised battles and glory," Bora said. "And Kitara delivered as promised."

Garcia looked to Gowr who smiled, eager to be in battle, as well.

"Hail the Gorn," Garcia said.

"Sir?" Gowr asked.

"We don't have time for a prolonged battle and any delay will only bring in more Cardassian warships," Garcia said. "So, we need to make this a short battle."

"I am curious to know what you will say to make the Gorn stand down or retreat, but I am game," Gowr said. "Hailing frequencies open,"

Garcia stood to reveal his best posture to the camera. "It's about time you Gorns showed up. I have the specimens you requested and will beam them onto your ships as soon as we're in range. The Cardassians are right behind us."

Garcia motioned the signal to be cut off. "Drop the cloak and slow to warp six to allow the Cardassians to catch up. The Gorn will arrive first. The moment we all drop out of warp, create an energy signature that will cause the Cardassians to think we beamed our Loraxes to the Gorn ships. Better yet, beam a Lorax transmitter to each of the Gorn ships. And someone needs to tell Jurak not to disable them, quick. Everyone's going to get a chance to play."

The SaLing dropped out of warp. The Gorn dropped out of warp, firing phasers. Gowr transported the Lorax transmitters and then raised the shields. They pushed through the battle group, avoiding significant damage. The Cardassian warships dropped out of warp and began to engage the Gorn ships, with the intent of immobilizing them as opposed to destroying them. All they wanted were their animals back alive. Garcia had Gowr activate the cloaking device on the SaLing and they quietly left the battle field. Firing only to disable a couple of Gorn ships to help the Cardassians out. As soon as the battle was over, they jumped to warp and were free. No one pursued.

"And that is how you start a war, my friends," Garcia said.

Bora swiveled her chair to face Garcia. "We were promised glory? There's no honor in sneaking out of a fight. Where are the war trophies we were promised?"

"We have a bigger battle to fight, Bora," Garcia said. "Trust me, that little skirmish is nothing compared to what's coming."

"I would like to know how the Gorn knew we would be there," Gowr said.

"So would I," Garcia agreed. "Your ship, Gowr."

Garcia went to the infirmary to check on the ranger. She was up and protesting fiercely. Bri was giving her no answers and was preventing her from leaving the infirmary. Consequently, she was furious, but Garcia understood her anger and confusion. She turned to Garcia and demanded an explanation.

"You're welcome," Garcia said.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"I'm the one responsible for saving your life and I thought you would say you're welcome," Garcia said.

"I demand that you release me at once," she said.

"You're released," Garcia said. "You're free to go anywhere on the ship that isn't restricted. My name is Captain Garcia, by the way. Tammis Garcia."

"And that's supposed to mean something to me?" she asked.

"Do you have a name?" Garcia asked.

"I'm not telling you anything," she said.

"Interesting name," Garcia said. "Allow me to fill you in. I was trespassing in the reserves when I found you, tied to a tree, being taken advantage of by a number of poachers that had slaughtered a Lorax."

She paled. "A Lorax came to the defense of a member of its pack," she said.

"Yes," Garcia said. "They shot at it, wounded it, but its cry brought in reinforcements. During the confusion, I managed to sedate the poachers and the Loraxes,

rescued you, liberated six of the Loraxes, one of which was badly hurt by the poachers. My Doctor, the ship's surgeon who healed you, believes it will survive."

"You stole Loraxes!?" she said.

"Yes," Garcia said. "I am borrowing them."

"You must return them at once!" she demanded.

"I intend to return them, but not at once," Garcia said.

"You can't keep them," she protested.

"I'm telling you straight up, I don't want to keep them. I need them to appease the appetites of a collector who wants them for his zoo. In exchange for bringing him these Loraxes, I get access to bid on stolen technology that I must recover at all cost," Garcia said. "I'm telling you more than I should, because I want you to trust me. My plan is to return them as soon as I have completed my mission and have arrested this moron for illegal animal smuggling and slave trading."

"You don't understand," she said, trying to establish a rapport with Garcia by softening her voice. "Your intent may be good and all, but these animals can not survive more than a week outside of the reserve. They have been genetically altered to prevent theft. If they are not provided the nutrituional supplements that we feed them, they will die."

"Can we replicate this supplement?" Garcia asked.

"No," she said. "It requires a complex mixture of plant and animal substrates that come from the forest itself. It was designed this way to force the animals to stay in the reserves. If they wander too far, their biology compels them to return to the reserves."

"How long can they survive?" Garcia asked.

"Fourteen days at the most," she said.

Garcia took a step closer to her. "Can you give me five days? Please. A lot of lives are dependant on me successfully completing my mission."

"You promise you will take them back?" she said.

"I promise," Garcia said.

"My name is Gil Shuliete, Forestry Reserve, and I'm an ecologist, with a Doctorate in biological science," she said. She extended her hand.

Garcia shook it. "If it doesn't disturb you to see your animals sedated, I will take you to them."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

"I can't believe it," Bliss said. "You brought me six? Three breeding pair?"

"Fortune favored me and I thought the extra pair might be useful should anything happen to the other two," Garcia said. "I didn't want to have to go back there."

Bliss whistled appreciatively, literally hugging the sleeping Lorax that had been beamed to his cargo hold. He seemed completely entranced by the animal and took a moment to listen for a heart beat.

"This is absolutely astonishing," Bliss said. "I never thought I would see such a creature in person, much less have them in my zoo."

"So, am I in?" Garcia asked.

Bliss smiled. "Sort of," Bliss said.

"Sort of?" Garcia asked.

Glor scowled. "Bliss, do I smell a double cross coming? You may have brought extra warships with you, but they are no match for the SaLing and the Pa Nun together."

"I just brought some friends to even the odds," Bliss said. "One can never be too careful in this line of work."

"We had a deal," Garcia reminded him.

"We did," Bliss agreed. "The thing is, you're just too hot right now, Garcia. Star Fleet and the Klingon Empire are looking for you, the Gorn, and now Cardassia. Surely you understand why I can't let you join the ring this time around."

"I understand," Garcia said. "And you'll understand why I will be taking these Loraxes back to Cardassia."

"No, no, no, wait, wait," Bliss said, bringing his hands up in the human 'surrender' gesture. "You and I might be able to strike an arrangement."

"I doubt you have anything I want," Garcia said.

"Craig?" Bliss said.

One of the persons in attendance stepped forwards. Craig Peterson, the Captain of the Inyar.

"Did you bring the Starburst like I instructed?" Bliss said.

"I did," Craig said.

Garcia perked up. "Can I see it?"

Craig smiled, motioned to his men, and they opened up a crate. An unimpressive missile lay in the box. It resembled the Genesis Devices that Garcia had on board the Path Finder, but Garcia would have preferred a tricorder to confirm what he was seeing.

"Don't drool," Bliss said. "It's just another big bomb."

"How much?" Garcia asked.

"I want the SaLing," Bliss said. "We'll make an even trade, this missile for the Vorcha class Starship."

"Hardly a fair trade," Gowr said. "You're not just giving him the ship, Garcia. You could scavenge parts off it for years and bring in enough money to buy all the bombs you wanted."

"There aren't enough bombs in all the alpha quadrant to go up against a Borg ship single handedly," Garcia said.

"Your obsession to kill a Borg ship is going to get you killed," Glor said. "This is a lousy deal and you know it."

"You yourself said that the maintenance of the SaLing alone makes it a liability," Bliss said. "Why not make the trade?"

"If you want to be a fool, Garcia, go ahead," Glor said. "But it's a bad deal. At least let me buy the photon torpedoes off you before you sell it."

"Hey, I'm bidding here," Bliss said.

"What, you can't stand a little competition?" Glor asked. "I bet I could find a buyer for the SaLing that would throw in some credits to float my habits for ten years. Hell, I could sell it back to the Klingon Empire for more than what you're offering."

"Is that it?" Bliss asked. He stroked the Starburst just as he did the Lorax. "Do you want me to throw some money at you, too? You've certainly earned it, bringing six Loraxes. Still, if rumor is correct, you won't find a more powerful weapon on the market."

"Tell me where you got it?" Garcia asked Craig.

"Why?" Craig asked.

"Because if it does what you promise, I might want to get more," Garcia said.

"That information will cost you," Craig said.

"How much?" Garcia asked.

"Two hundred Star Fleet issue photon torpedoes," Craig said.

Garcia looked to Bliss. Bliss smiled. "Yes, I told him."

"I have them," Garcia said. "They're on board the SaLing."

Craig handed him a PADD with the coordinates to his ship. "Beam them to my cargo hold. I will tell you what I know once they are there and my officer confirms their presence."

"I'll beam half," Garcia said. "And the remaining when I have evaluated whether or not your information sounds plausible."

"Fair enough," Craig agreed, handing Garcia a PADD with the transporter coordinates.

"The Inyar is here?" Glor demanded. "How many other cloaked ships are present?"

Bliss only smiled and waved a finger at Glor for asking such a question. "Don't worry," Bliss said. "Had I wanted you dead, you would be. We're just having a friendly little game amongst the big boys, isn't that right, Garcia?"

Craig touched his ear as if he were listening to a hidden ear piece and nodded. "Okay, Garcia, here's what I know," Craig said. "There is an asteroid field in the Omadrán star system. Ten light years from that there is a secret Klingon military base, hidden in a nebula. I had a friend that worked there and he told me of this powerful new weapon, supposedly capable of killing a Borg ship. He said that the station was defenseless, but it turned out that they have this high tech holographic defense system that is fairly formidable. I managed to get in and steal this before I was forced to flee."

"You expect us to buy that story?" Glor demanded.

"He just did," Craig pointed out. "The rest of the torpedoes, please."

Garcia shook his head. "I have no way of confirming what you said at this time," Garcia said. "And I found no reference to a secret base in Sheaar's files."

"It wouldn't be a very good secret if they had an address listing on a computer system, now would it," Craig said.

"Likely story," Glor said.

"It's the truth," Craig said. "The only reason I have not returned for more is because of their defense system."

"That part, at least, sounds true," Glor said. "You're not known for your courage."

"Diss me again and I will kill you where you stand," Craig said.

"Bring it," Glor said, stepping forward.

"Both of you stop this," Bliss said. "You know my rules. No fighting or killing during negotiations. If you two want to fight, you can do it on your own time."

"I want the rest of my weapons," Craig said.

"Garcia?" Bliss asked, obviously making himself the mediator.

Garcia surrendered the remaining photon torpedoes to Craig and he confirmed their arrival.

"Thank you," Craig said.

"Tam, you may be able to fight, but you are lousy when it comes to negotiating deals," Glor said.

"Maybe I should ask you to return a portion of what I paid you to get me in this mess?" Garcia said.

Bliss laughed. "Gentlemen, let's keep it civil. Garcia, do we have a trade, or what?"

"I want the Starburst," Garcia said.

"Wonderful," Bliss said. "Here's how the transaction will go down. You will have all of your crew beam to the Pa Nun."

"Now, wait just a minute. I was only paid to bring you here and get you in, not to take your crew on," Glor protested. "I'm not a tourist boat."

"I will compensate you," Bliss assured him. "As soon as my men are on board the SaLing and it is safely on its way, I will transport the Starburst to the Pa Nun."

"How do I know you'll keep up your end of the bargain?" Garcia asked.

"Tam, Bliss has always kept his deals with me," Glor said. "He may low ball you, but he does what he says he will do. In that respect, he is like you. He delivers."

"I didn't become so successful by breaking deals, Garcia," Bliss added. "It's bad for business. So, are you going to play with the big boys, are not?"

"I want the Starburst," Garcia said. "And an opportunity to participate in future biddings."

"Good. Go to the Pa Nun and wait," Bliss said. "As soon as the SaLing is on its way, I will beam your precious Borg killer weapon over to you. And, because I like you, I will throw in some extra credits. Maybe you can buy yourself a space yacht or a nice run-about."

Garcia nodded. They were escorted to the transporter room where they were beamed to the Pa Nun.

"So, are you really going to let them have it?" Glor asked.

"Yes, temporarily," Garcia said, activating his com. badge.

"We could just kill them now and take it," Glor said.

"I have no guarantee that both weapons are here," Garcia said. "Further, I don't want to kill any of the slaves or the Loraxes. We're going with plan B."

"Very well," Glor said. He touched his com. badge. "Gowr, have everyone beam over to the Pa Nun. Evacuate the SaLing."

"Understood," Gowr said.

Glor and Garcia waited. Shuliette joined them and demonstrated that she was reasonably concerned for her animals, but Garcia assured her that things were going as planned. Gowr was the last one to return to the Pa Nun and accepted orders from Captain Glor just as he had never left his position. "Go to the Bridge and be ready to go to warp as soon as I give the word."

Gowr saluted and departed. Another ten minutes passed before Bliss hailed the Pa Nun.

"Garcia, it was great doing business with you," Bliss said. "I look forward to doing so again in the future. Stand by to receive your purchase."

Two objects appeared on the transporter pad. One was the crate with the Starburst weapon. The other was a photon torpedo casing. Glor and Garcia immediately thought it was double cross, but N'elent took a scan of it and shook her head. "It's not a bomb," she said. "I'm unable to scan the interior, but I believe there is a stasis field in place protecting the contents."

Garcia stepped up to the casing. A note was attached and it was in English. "Garcia, this a parting farewell gift. Enjoy. Sincerely, Bliss." Garcia looked to Glor for an opinion, but he only shrugged. Garcia ran his hand along the casing, found the hidden latch, and sprung it open. As it opened, there was an audible pop as the stasis field went off, and an Orion slave girl opened her eyes. She saw Garcia, smiled, and reached out to him. Out of reflex, he took her hand and helped her down out of the casing. She bowed at his feet and stayed that way until he told her to stand.

"An Orion slave girl, how fitting," N'elent said. "It will make a nice addition to your collection of females."

"I do not collect or own slaves," Garcia snapped, angry at her comment.

The Slave girl squinted and raised her hand as if to ward off a blow. Garcia realized the anger in his voice must have frightened her. "Shh, it's okay," Garcia said. "Stand up. No one is going to hurt you."

The Slave girl stood and made a motion towards her mouth, as if asking for food in sign language.

"She imprinted on you," Glor said. "You were the first one she saw when you opened the casing. Whether you keep slaves or not, she is now your responsibility."

"Oh, bloody hell," Garcia said.

Again, the Orion animal woman shrunk back in fear from Garcia's anger. Garcia rubbed his forehead, trying to prevent the headache from turning into a migraine.

♪♪▶

"You traded the SaLing for only one Starburst?" Kitara asked, almost scolding.

"No," Kletsova said. "He also bought a slave woman."

"She is not a slave," Garcia corrected.

"No," Kletsova agreed. "She's more like a pet."

"An animal woman," Jurak corrected. "But not a pet until after she has been properly domesticated."

The Slave woman sat on the medical bed in the Path Finder's infirmary, picking grapes and cheese bites from off her plate. She offered Garcia a grape. He shook his head, "no." She ate quietly, closing her eyes and turning her head towards the full spectrum lights that Jurak had turned on above her head. The Orion Girls were not just green as a weird evolutionary skin color quirk. The green was actually chlorophyll and it

enabled them to supplement their diets during times of food scarcity. But even when food was plentiful, the green helped them to guarantee a constant source of food during pregnancy. There were many a stories of people visiting Orion prime and walking the beaches to watch the Orion women soaking up the sun along the beaches.

“I have met intelligent Orion women,” Garcia said. “Why is she mute?”

“She is more than mute,” Jurak said. “Her brain has not developed the cognitive abilities of a normal, healthy, adult, Orion woman. She is literally more animal than woman. The process for making the perfect Orion Slave girl requires the process to start from birth. They are kept in the wild and prevented from becoming social until puberty. In addition to limiting their social interactions, which impairs brain development, they also limit stimulus to only include nature settings, and further neurological impairment is induced through a lack of nutrition by infecting them with a parasite. The parasite doesn’t kill them, but it robs them of the necessary nutrition that the brain needs to develop greater cognitive abilities.”

“A parasite can lower IQ?” Kletsova asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said. “On old Earth, in regions where *Necator Americanus* was epidemic, in both North and South America up until the year 2051, there was a drastic drop in IQ in certain poverty stricken regions due to the presence of this parasite. It entered the body through the soles of the feet, as the kids walked around barefoot, more than likely stepping into dog feces. Once a child is infected, the parasites rob so much nutrients from the host that the host becomes malnourished, which adversely affects the development of the brain. The children that were infected would eat dirt, a form of self medication to keep their stomachs from hurting. Most people thought they were eating dirt because they were impoverished and couldn’t get enough food, but the truth was they had so many parasites in their stomach that they got cramps. Missionaries would bring in money and food relief, but often failed to recognize the problem for what it was.”

“That’s horrible,” Kletsova said. “I am always amazed that we survived as a race considering what people use to have to go through. What does that mean for her, though? She has the mind of a three year old?”

“No, you can’t compare it to an emotional or cognitive developmental age,” Jurak said. “Any more than you can compare a cat’s emotional and cognitive age to a human child. In some way, a three year old human child has more intellectual capacity than a cat, and will grow to exceed the cat’s ability to think. However, a cat is more self sufficient and therefore more capable than a three year old. They’re just not comparable. They’re different. She has a mature animal mind, for an Orion animal woman, but she lacks the cognitive ability that you or I would have. Calling her a cat or a dog is not a fair comparison, either. She has certain abilities and can be trained, but she will never have the ability to understand consequences or be able to plan ahead. She can only live in the present, the here and now.”

“Can this condition be cured?” Garcia asked.

“No,” Jurak said.

Doctor Misan chipped in. “Yes, it can,” he said. “But it will take time. We can give her medicines that will allow her brain to develop to a normal adult Orion brain and supply her with appropriate stimulus that will encourage the brain to build the necessary neural connections. It just takes time, more time than what most people are willing to

devote in order to fix the problem. It might take ten years before she has developed the social and cognitive skills to be considered an adult and not require a handler or master.”

“Does Orion offer schools and medical facilities for handling this?” Garcia asked.

“Yes,” Misan said. “There are number of facilities that act on behalf of women like this. However, they are usually filled to capacity, and someone of your slave’s age and health would probably just end up back on the market. It’s simply cheaper to let someone own her. Plus, the facility uses the profits made in the exchange to help the other wards of the state.”

“Lovely,” Kletsova said. “It’s amazing to me that slavery is alive and well in the 24th century.”

The Slave Girl put her plate down, not caring that food spilt off the plate, and slid off the medical table. She went to Garcia and put her arms around him, laying her head on his shoulders. It was the same sort of display of trust and affection one might see from a loyal pet. Only, the affection included nuzzling and kissing. He petted her affectionately, as he might his cat, almost unconsciously, as if to reassure her that she was safe.

“Well, I suspect you two will get along just fine,” Kletsova said. “If you’ll excuse me?”

Kletsova departed. Kitara scowled, wishing Garcia had corrected Kletsova’s attitude. She didn’t like what she heard, but she wasn’t ready to tell Garcia her opinion on the matter.

“So, what’s next on our agenda?” Kitara asked, changing the subject.

“The Pa Nun is following the Inyar,” Garcia said. “It seems to be heading towards Sherman’s planet. I want the Path Finder to be there when it arrives so we can recover the final Starburst, or at least find out where he has it. Meanwhile, we allow Bliss some time to take the SaLing and his animals back to his hideout. Once he is there, we’ll use the Gateway to board and recover the SaLing and take Bliss into custody.”

“Sounds simple enough,” Kitara said.

“I agree,” Garcia said. “So plan for surprises. Knowing my luck, it won’t be so easy. If you’ll excuse me, I better make my slave girl comfortable.”

Garcia escorted the slave girl back to his quarters. She held his hand and followed, looking at him adoringly. He ignored the stares from the crew as he led her along. Her attention shifted to many of the sounds and light and when a noise frightened her she closed the distance between her and Garcia, clinging tighter to him. Garcia entered his quarters to find Aahla waiting for him. Rivan was petting the big cat and Clemmons was sitting under the big cat’s front paw, allowing itself to be cleaned, cat fashion, by the bigger cat. Just one sweep of the tiger’s tounge and Clemmons was clean. Rivan greeted Garcia eagerly.

“Oh my, why didn’t you tell me how big Clemmons might grow?” Rivan asked.

“Um, Rivan, Clemmons is a fully grown cat. That is a tiger, similar, but different,” Garcia said. “Didn’t you expain that to her, Aahla?”

“You’re the only one who can hear me,” Aahla said. “And you should resist speaking to me outloud, unless you don’t mind people thinking you’re crazy.”

Garcia’s slave girl approached the tiger cautiously and reached out to pet it. When the tiger didn’t stir, she looked to Garcia, her eyes large like a child’s eye on a birthday, and then she sat next to the tiger and petted it to her hearts content.

“Who’s your friend?” Rivan asked.

Garcia sighed. “I don’t know her name. She might not have one yet. She is an Orion Slave Girl, by definition, but we will not be treating her as a slave.”

“I would hope not,” Rivan said.

“Rivan, I have a job for you,” Garcia said. “This girl, young woman, has some special needs and will require constant monitoring and some training, and probably all the affection you can muster to help erase the scars from some of her previous training. Would you be willing to do this for me?”

“You mean she is special?” Rivan asked.

“How do you mean, special?” Garcia asked.

“Mentally lacking. I think your medical term for it is down syndrome,” Rivan said. “My people have this, but I have not seen any on Earth.”

“We cured that disease a long time ago,” Garcia said. “And, no, she doesn’t have down syndrome, but she has some developmental issues that we’re going to medically correct. I will be doing the majority of the work with her, but I will need help when I’m occupied with ship’s duty. You don’t have to do this, Rivan. I can get ship’s personnel to help me.”

“Oh, no, please, I want to be useful,” Rivan said. “I will be happy to do this.”

“Thank you, Rivan. Will you take her to the holodeck and let her get some exercise,” Garcia said. “She might like a beach setting. I need some time alone.”

“Sure,” Rivan said. “What should we call her?”

“How about Ori?” Garcia asked.

“Ori?” Rivan called to the slave girl.

“You’ll have to train her on her name,” Garcia said.

Rivan went to Ori and extended her hand. Ori looked to Garcia for instructions. He nodded and telepathically projected positive feelings towards her. Ori took Rivan’s hand and allowed herself to be led. Once they departed, Garcia sat down in a chair facing the big cat.

“Okay, how is it that the Gorn keep finding me?” Garcia asked.

“They are being given information by the Preservers,” Aahla said, approaching Garcia in human form. She sat on the floor next to him and touched his knee, affectionately, like a cat might. “One of them has an Orb, similar to the ones you use to free your mental companions, only their Orb is telepathically linked to a specific god. The information it can provide is limited to the knowledge of that particular god, and it’s impossible to know what that information might be. Not to mention they can barter for information in their universe, so they’re not restricted in this universe. I suspect that the Gorn god has sufficient knowledge of the future that they know approximately where you are, or, he or she is using a computer, programmed with sufficient variables to predict where you will be.”

“Which ever it is it seems to be of sufficient quality that they’re able to find me,” Garcia said.

“It is limited,” Aahla assured him. “If it’s like my computer system, the information will be linked to a temporal event. It is a divining process, similar to the one I used to locate McCoy on the Einstein. There are variables in the time line that can’t be accounted for. An example is that Gary Seven was sent to Earth to participate in a temporal event and a variation in the temporal line caused him to be intercepted by the

Enterprise. You must understand that though time appears to be linear, it is neither linear nor non linear. Your mind simply lacks the cognitive ability to understand how wonderfully complex and involved space time really is. If you will permit me to paraphrase your Earth's Albert Einstein: time, the past, present and future, is merely a stubbornly persistent illusion."

"Illusion or not, I have to live in it," Garcia said. "How do I get the Gorn to see reason and just leave me alone?"

"I am not able to answer that," Ahla said.

"I thought you were here to help me?" Garcia said more than asked.

"I am, but that help must conform to my rule structure," Ahla said. "Just as you must deal with certain species under the Prime Directive paradigm, I, too, am limited in my ability to assist. I will, however, balance the playing field should the enemy gods forgoe their own rules."

"Who are you?" Garcia asked.

"I am Ahla," the big cat answered, scent marking his leg and then his shoulder. "My people refer to themselves as the Benefactors. We have, from time to time, adopted members from your species for special training and reinserted them into the time line."

"Adopted or kidnapped?" Garcia asked. "Are you any better than the Preservers?"

"Again, we have a function, a higher purpose, and we know what the best possible outcome should be," Ahla said. "Your frustration comes from a lack of knowledge and insufficient belief that a higher power might actually be operating in your favor. You're very cynical, Garcia. Your paranoia is no doubt a by product of the Kelvan raising you immersed in a twentieth century American paradigm. You have an innate distrust for higher powers, authority, and organizations."

"I don't believe in a higher power," Garcia said. "Sure, I am philosophically open to the idea proposed in the Desiderata that the Universe is unfolding as it should be, but not because someone, or something, is driving it."

"I would argue the point that you don't believe in a higher power," Ahla said. "You subscribe to a number of powers that you recognize as having authority over you. Star Fleet is an example. A police force. A governor of a province. Your parents. Nature. All of these are examples of higher power."

"You know I meant supernatural," Garcia said. "There are no devils in hell or gods in heaven maliciously pushing buttons to make my life miserable. Mostly, my sorrow is brought on by my own mistakes. I am not a victim of the Universe. I have to take responsibility for my thoughts, behaviors, and actions."

"As you should, but surely you accept the fact that there are things out of your control," Ahla said.

"Of course," Garcia said. "Control is just another form of illusion."

"Yes, but to trust enough to let go is acceptance in a higher power," Ahla said. "Your concepts of god or a higher power are formed in the earliest years of your life. They are chiseled into stone on your being. It will take effort and persistence to change these beliefs from your youth. You still carry the weight of these stone tablets and its time to put them down in favor of a better paradigm. It will take persistence to wear your original beliefs down so that you can replace them with more appropriate thought patterns."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Garcia said. "I hear a bunch of metaphysical water slushing around, but nothing concrete."

"It's the same message you've been told over and over, but you ignore it in favor of the stone of your past. This stone keeps leaving an imprint in your present and blocks you from your best potential," Aahla said. "It's weighing you down."

"The past is irrelevant," Garcia said.

"Only from a linear perspective," Aahla said.

"I've replaced my childhood paradigms several times over," Garcia protested.

"No, you just built on top of them and around them," Aahla corrected. "You need to knock out the base and start over from scratch."

"To replace it with what? A new concept? Your concept?" Garcia asked.

"If I told you your concept of a higher power was linked to words such as malevolent, punitive, judgemental, jealous, and or cruel god, you would not submit to such a power," Aahla said. "And I can understand why. But if I were to introduce you to a higher power that was loving, compassionate, capable of healing, understanding, then this should be more appealing. You would rather surrender to this second concept, would you not?"

"Of course," Garcia said. "Those are qualities I admire in my fellow man and hope to cultivate in myself."

"Then why do you choose to carry the first concept around with you?" Garcia said.

"You know," Garcia said, his frustration growing. He closed his fist and then raised his index finger, as if asking for a moment, and then finished his thought. "I have work to do. I don't have time for a philosophical discussion. Let me know when and if you can offer anything more constructive."

Garcia got up and stormed out of his own quarters. He paced off some of his anger as he considered his plans for retaking the SaLing. His com. badge chirped once and then went right to voice, signaling an emergency.

"Tammias, I need you. I'm in the galley." It was Karsat calling him.

The Galley was just a hop, skip, and a jump away from where he was, and he was there in a flash. What he found was Lt. Bri, wounded and lying on the floor. A wild Targ was scratching at the transparent half door leading back behind the bar. Karsat was on the floor, holding the door shut with her feet. Bri looked up and saw the Captain.

"Get out," Bri managed, between gasps.

The targ turned to the sound of Bri's voice and then saw Garcia. It bounced forwards aggressively, barking savagely. Garcia emptied his mind of fear and projected calm, assertive energy. He stepped forwards and pointed at the targ. The targ seemed genuinely surprised, lowered its head and growled fiercely. Garcia put one hand on his hip, stepped forwards, and pointed, and said, "That's enough."

The animal lay down and then rolled over to expose its belly. Garcia knelt down and picked up the stick leash from the floor. He snapped his fingers and the targ came to him, crawling, whimpering. On its own power, the targ stuck its head in the leash. Garcia stood, pulling on the leash to make the animal stand. He then pushed on its back side and forced it to sit down.

"In all my days, I have never seen such a miracle," Kitara said.

Garcia turned to see Kitara and Jurak standing in the doorway.

"It's not a miracle," Garcia said. "It's animal psychology. Animals only attack when you show fear, or if they are threatened. Jurak, tend to Bri."

Jurak stepped forwards into the galley and the targ rose and barked. Garcia silenced it with a snap of his finger. It sat back down, looking up at Garcia, whimpering.

"You must teach me that trick," Jurak said.

"Again, it's not a trick. You came in with prejudice and fear and the animal responded to that," Garcia said. "If he had been berserk and going to kill, he would not have stopped attacking Bri until he was dead and I would have been bit when I entered. Instead, as soon as Bri took up the submissive position on the floor, the targ moved to the next target to dominate, which, in this case, was Karsat."

Jurak helped Bri to his feet.

"I simply can't believe it," Karsat said. "That's the biggest targ I have ever seen, and you handle it like it's a pup."

"It was tonight's dinner," Bri said.

"Not any longer," Garcia said. "Jurak, you and I had a deal. If I met a targ it would be my pet. This animal has a permanent stay of execution. In fact, you may pass the word that this pet is now the ship's mascot. Bri, you will be in charge of making sure this animal is fed and watered, and gets daily walks on the holodeck. You will walk it using the techniques I will be teaching you. If I hear that this animal, or any other animal on board this ship is mistreated, I will have the entire crew on a vegetarian diet for the rest of their time on board, is that understood?"

"Aye, Captain," Bri said.

"I wish to learn as well," Kitara said.

"I will teach everyone who wants to learn," Garcia said. "But there's one catch."

"And what's that?" Kitara asked.

Garcia smiled mischievously.



Having taught them the basic moves, Garcia had the computer start the music again. Klingon, Andorian, Glean, Orion Slave Girl, and Human began to dance, following Garcia's lead. The Klingons were indifferent to the country music and Garcia had to convince them that the dance was a sublime exercise in martial arts and would enable them to better act as one. In the end, he had the senior staff of his crew line dancing. He made it clear that the entire crew would be learning this, and variations thereof, and it would become one of their rituals, in addition to Tai Chi and calisthenics before each shift's start. Garcia would meet each shift at the start of their day to lead in the rituals.

When this first group had learned the moves, Garcia dismissed them. Ori continued to dance on her own, adding her own movements now that there was no one to conform to. Rivan ran up to Garcia and hugged him.

"That was so much fun!" Rivan said. "Why haven't you taught me this before?"

"It didn't occur to me that you might like dancing," Garcia said.

"What girl doesn't like dancing? Can we dance some more?" Rivan asked.

"Of course," Garcia said.

They danced for another hour, with Garcia increasing the difficulty of the routine to continually challenge Rivan and Ori. Duana and Ilona participated using the Orbs to

be physically present, while the mental Troi and Lal participated, but only in Garcia's mind.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Sherman's Planet flew neither Federation nor Klingon flags, having long ago declared their independence from both to make their own way. The population was comprised of human and Klingon settlers with large communities that tended to be mixed races and smaller communities where people had chosen to be with their own kind. The larger communities seemed to be flourishing, at least from orbit, but with all cities, they had their share of political issues. The Path Finder, operating under cloak, waited for the Bird of Prey, Inyar. The Inyar arrived cloaked, but its presence was detected by its re-entry profile as it descended into the atmosphere. From the moment it entered the atmosphere, it was a simple matter to track it as it stirred the air around it, which might have gone unnoticed if someone wasn't looking for it. The Path Finder monitored it all the way to the facility where it docked and was taken to an underground shelter.

"Do you want to switch to active scans?" Kitara said.

"Not yet," Garcia said. "I don't want to alert them to our presence."

"I'm unable to detect any Genesis signatures using passive scans. But if he has the weapon here, we should be able to find it," Sendak said.

Garcia nodded. "Keep gathering intel. Alert our people on the ground that Craig is planet side and to keep their heads up. Losira, send some agents to inspect the landing facility. Try not to trip any alarms or otherwise get yourself noticed."

Losira smiled pleasantly. "I can do that," she said, and looked up and to the right, a facial cue that she was accessing information on and interacting with her main frame. "Agents have been generated. They're on location. They are skirting the outer perimeter, gauging defensive capabilities and security sensors. No alarms activated."

"Captain," Kitara said. "A Klingon vessel, K'tinga class, has just uncloaked star board side. They're transmitting a signal."

"Can you trace it?" Garcia asked Trini.

Trini punched up some buttons. "Yes. The call was picked up at the Inayar's landing facility," Trini said, activating a new program. "I decrypted their code. I can play back."

"Just summarize," Garcia said.

"Captain," Losira interrupted. "This facility would seem to be a privately funded military base. Multiple levels. I will try and locate and access a computer terminal."

"Just don't get caught," Garcia said. "Pull your agents out the moment an alarm is tripped."

Gowr stepped onto the Bridge. "Admiral," Gowr said. "Glor wanted you to know we are in the system. We're maintaining radio silence, per your instructions."

"Thank you, Captain," Garcia said. "Stay here a moment. Sendak, see if you can log onto the Klingon ship's computer and download their data system. Find out what they're about. Trini, what have you got?"

"The Captain of the Klingon vessel has made a request for photon torpedoes. Craig is haggling over price," Trini said.

"The ship is the Neos, retired from service ten years ago and sold at an auction," Kitara said.

"The Empire sells ships?" Garcia asked.

"Not usually, but when they do, they strip it of all its combat features," Kitara said.

"That doesn't appear stripped," McKnight said. "If anything, I would say it has been fortified."

"I agree," Kitara said. "Another ship is uncloaking and entering orbit. They're contacting Craig."

"He's a popular man," McKnight observed.

"Captain, it's a Romulan Scoutship," Kitara said. "A Cardassian warship is contacting Craig via subspace communications. It should arrive in about ten minutes."

"How fun is this?" Garcia asked. "All we need now are some Gorn."

"Ten ships approaching at warp nine point seven," Kitara said, looking at Garcia crossly. "They're Gorn."

"Goat's mouth," Trini said.

"What?" Kitara said.

"That's what we say in Trinidad when someone says something that comes true. Like, if I say a friend will call and the next phone ring proves to be her, or I hope we don't get a flat tire and the tire goes flat," Trini said. "That's goat mouth."

"I was just joking," Garcia said. "Kitara, take an Away Team down to the planet and capture Craig alive. Have the team already on the surface move in. Losira, start sabotaging the facility, but don't kill anyone. Battle stations, everyone. Red Alert. Sendak, start full active scans of the complex, I want to find that Starburst if it's here. Let's move like we got a purpose, people. Gowr, report back to the Pa Nun."

The twelve Gorn ships dropped out of warp, already in battle formation. The lead ships fired torpedoes at random, spreading a radiation field that made traditional cloaks less effective.

"Activate primary cloak and raise shields," Garcia said. "Maintain secondary cloak as long as possible. Helm, half impulse heading two point three, mark two six zero, and spin us about. Activate anti-photon torpedo system."

The Gorn ships were firing at everything that was semi cloaked. Ship that were cloaked dropped their cloaks in order to return fire. Photon torpedoes were fast, but the anti torpedoes were even faster, leaving a faint line like a laser that tracked from ship to intersection point. Photon torpedoes were detonated by the anti torpedoes, and the faint trails began to disperse like smoke after a fireworks display. Shields began to fluoresce due to the energy release. Even with the Path Finder taking most of the torpedoes out of action, the Neos managed to score a direct hit to a Gorn ship. It exploded and the remaining ships divided into a new formation. From the planet, Craig launched an orbital battery from his facility, followed by twelve missiles that rocketed up towards various ships in orbit. The missiles beat the orbital battery, giving it the coverfire necessary for it to deploy and activate. It fired at everything that moved, indiscriminately, friend or foe.

The way the battle was flowing, there was no chance that the Path Finder would sustain damage, but the Gorn and the arms traders were all likely to die if the battle wasn't finished soon. The Gorn would not quit or listen to reason for their own perverse reasons. The arms traders might listen, but at this point they would not disengage for their own perverse reasons. No doubt some of them were enjoying an opportunity to try out some of the weapons they had purchased.

Garcia tired of the battle and gripped the arm rest of his chair, logging onto the Kelvan computer. It was easy enough to immobilize all the crews of all the ships and

power down their systems to the barest of functions, life support only. Once the night sky was silent again, he turned his focus on the planet's surface and the militia base which was now being stirred up like a kid poking an ant mound with a stick. He brought his Away Team members back to the ship with a blink of an eye. He found Craig Peterson and put him in the Brig. He then tore the base apart looking for the remaining Starburst, or any hint that it had even been there. Finding not a trace, he immobilized the militia at the base, transported them to one of the immobilized ships, and then destroyed the base beyond repair by blowing up the Inyar. The two hundred destroyed Star Fleet issue torpedoes would leave a signature trace, suggesting stolen property. That would be enough evidence for an investigation. Further, there were enough illegal arms on all the ships that would enable Star Fleet to legally detain all the people currently in orbit.

All in all, Garcia had engaged the Kelvan computer for two minute thirty seven seconds. Letting go required all of his strength, but he managed. He stood up and staggered forwards, purposefully away from the chair and temptation.

"Contact Picard, Priotiry One, request his presence here," Garcia instructed. "They're in the immediate area, waiting for us to call. As soon as the message is out, jam all subspace frequencies. No more messages get out of this system until I know what Craig did with the other Starburst."

Glor appeared on the screen. "Is that it? The battle had just begun."

"Salvage what you want, but make it quick. We're going to have to act fast," Garcia said. "Enterprise is on its way."

And then Garcia collapsed. He awoke in sickbay.

On several tables next to him lay the bodies of several dead Gorn. He sat up, perhaps too quickly, but he grabbed his forehead and pushed on.

"Thank you for supplying me with so many Gorn cadavers," Jurak said.

"I did that?" Garcia asked.

"You brought them in with the Kelvan transporter. These two were exposed to the vacuum of space when their ship exploded," Jurak said. "This one died due to a concussion. This one apparently inhaled plasma and burned out his lungs. Note the char marks on his skin. These are really tough animals."

Garcia turned his head away. He had no memory of supplying Jurak with the Gorn cadavers, but since the shields were up during the battle, it made sense that he had done this, since it would have required the Kelvan transporter to get through the shields. Had the Gorn bodies been in space longer, there would have been additional degradation profiles to the bodies, so he had recovered them fairly quickly after their deaths, which possibly meant he might have been able to save them. Jurak was no doubt the oldest person in his crew, but he sounded like a kid in a candy shop, and Garcia didn't know if he should be more disgusted with himself for not doing more for the Gorn, or for Jurak and his perverse enthusiasm for cadavers.

"Captain, look at this," Jurak said, scanning an area of a Gorn arm with his tricorder. "They all have the same tattoos. It translates, something brotherhood. I think they've established religious order devoted entirely to your destruction."

"I'm not that important," Garcia protested, after forcing himself to examine the tattoo.

Kitara was present and right in his face when he turned around. "I believe the Kelvan device is harmful to you," Kitara said. "You do not look good."

"Oh, he's fine," Jurak said, waving a hand of dismissal. "He's up and about. That's all that matters"

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," Garcia mumbled.

"Not all the time," Kitara disagreed, but she pushed on. "A number of illegal weapon systems were brought on board the Path Finder. Are you starting your own collection?"

"I don't remember collecting any weapons," Garcia said. "I remember destroying the Inyar with the photon torpedoes we stole from the Einstein."

"Not all of them. One hundred and eighty are in the shuttle bay," Kitara said.

"Did we sustain any damage?" Garcia asked.

"No damage or injuries to report," Kitara said.

"The Enterprise?" Garcia asked.

"Will arrive in one hour, thirty minutes," Kitara said. "I took liberty of permanently disabling the transporters on the enemy ships, as well as their warpdrive and weapon systems, just in case they were to come out of their trances before the Enterprise finished taking them into custody."

"Good. I think they will be immobilized for a couple of hours, but good," Garcia said. "Shall we go and interview Craig?"

"No need," Kitara said. "He spilled his guts the moment he saw me. He is fully human and has lived on the reputation of being half Klingon, but without his weapons and friends, he has proven himself to be nothing more than a coward."

"You didn't lean on him too hard, I hope," Garcia asked.

"Do you really want to know?" Kitara asked.

Garcia thought about it. It was the old, 'someone's got a nuclear bomb and is about to detonate it' argument. If torturing one person prevented the death of millions would you torture? What if your methods only prevented the death of thousands? Of one? Where was the line drawn and at what point did one risk losing their soul to prevent a catastrophe? A war between the Federation and Klingon Empires could cost billions of lives, in addition to whatever planet Craig used the Star Burst on, so Garcia wasn't too concerned about Craig's rights or whether Kitara read them to him. Besides, Craig was well aware of the penalty of playing Klingon warrior when caught by another Klingon warrior. Technically, he was lucky to be alive at all.

"What did you learn?" Garcia asked.

"He sold the second Starburst to Bliss," Kitara said.

"And does he know the secret location of Bliss's base?" Garcia asked.

"No," Kitara said. "But we should, shortly."

"Contact the Pa Nun and get Gowr over here. Have him prepare the boarding party," Garcia said. "Then meet me in shuttle bay one."

Kitara saluted and went about her business. Garcia closed his eyes to the smell of dead Gorn and burnt clothing. What really upset him was the fact that burnt Gorn actually smelt appealing to his appetite. He departed the infirmary. He felt his hands shaking and observed an urge to engage the Kelvan computer again. The Klevan bracelet weighed heavy on his arm. He entered a room, tossed it into a replicator to recycle it, punched up the order and then hesitated. He walked away, returned, pounded the wall with a fist, and then surrendered to his need. He put the bracelet back on.

"Just a little longer," he told himself. "I might need it when I face Bliss."

Garcia sat down on the floor and leaned back against the wall, his left arm ready with the bracelet and the button exposed. He stared at the shiny, silver surface of the button, surrounded by a gold and luminescent concentric circles. With one touch he could end his torment. He could even wish the bracelet away or disable the computer system or end his life. He cried.

The mental Deanna Troi approached him. She sat down beside him and drew her knees up and rested her arms against her legs. She was dressed professionally, Star Fleet issue trousers and shirt. The outfit conformed to her body nicely, and the shirt was cut so that it revealed ample cleavage.

"Are you going to be okay?" she finally asked.

"I don't know," Garcia said. "I didn't know it was going to be this hard."

"No one ever does," Troi said. "That's why they call it an addiction. Twelve step programs are very efficient. Live one day at a time. Memorizing the Serenity prayer offers a great deal of benefit."

"I already have that memorized," Garcia said.

"Knowing it and repeating it daily are two different things," Troi said.

"What exactly is my problem?" Garcia asked.

"Why don't you tell me?" Troi said.

Garcia shook his head. "Why do I even bother talking to you? You're as bad as the real Troi. Answering questions with questions. Why don't you just for once in your life answer me straight?"

"The problem is that you know what's wrong and you are not willing or able to do what needs to be done," Troi said.

"And what's that? Throw away the Kelvan bacelit? Destroy this ship?"

"Just walk away," Troi said. "Go live a simple life, farming and raising animals."

"I want you out of my head," Garcia said.

"Even if you could wish me away, you would still hear my voice," Troi said.

"You're not living the way you really want to live. You're out of balance. You're out of control. And, like most people who are in your situation, you're going to have to hit rock bottom before you are going to be able to even consider moving towards health. I don't know where rock bottom is for you, but I suspect a lot of people are going to die before you hit it."

"It's not my fault!" Garcia said. "I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask to be Kelvan or to be plugged into a Kelvan computer."

"Whether you asked for the cocaine or not you took it, and it worked, and now, you are on a downward spiral," Troi said. "There is never an upward spiral. You can't control this on your own. You need help."

"Is that what you're about?" Garcia asked.

"I can't help you," Troi said. "I'm part of the problem. I exist in your mind because of the Kelvan device. The other mental companions can't help you because they share the same brain and are equally afflicted. We're just as pacified as you are when you use the device, the only difference being is that your personality is dominant. Control freak dominant. That is probably a good thing. Who knows what sort of righteous mischief Ilona would do if her personality was dominant. Duana has her dark streak as well. Lal is probably the healthiest personality you got inside you, but she's a child and shouldn't be wielding such power."

“What about you?” Garcia asked.

“I just want to be with you,” Troi said. “That’s what I was programmed for. That is my only function in life. And if you being unbalanced increases the frequency that you allow me close enough to counsel or otherwise engage you, then I will see to it that you remain unbalanced.”

Garcia stood up, straightened his uniform. “I’m going to beat this,” Garcia said.

“Of course you are,” Troi said.

Troi watched as Garcia vacated the room. She could remain there as long as Garcia imagined her to remain there, for in truth, she really was only there in Garcia’s mind. She sighed and said, “I love you, Tam,” knowing the echoes of that comment would reach his core and reinforce his resolve and wanting.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Kitara was waiting for Garcia in the shuttle bay when he arrived. He opened the Gateway and then called for Losira. "Losira, I need you."

Losira appeared, her dress something that resembled the costumes from the sci fi classic, Logan's Run. Her hair went from flat to suddenly 1970's, American style, as if a hair dryer at fluffed it up right before their eyes. He didn't comment on her dress.

"How can I serve you?" she asked, touching him lightly on the arm.

"I want to conduct an experiment. See if you can pass through the gate. I want you to materialize on the SaLing, inside Jeffries tube six, level nine," Garcia said.

Losira nodded, and focused up and to the right. "I'm there. No one is present to detect me and the intruder alarms have not been reconfigured from when you last reprogrammed them."

"Excellent," Garcia said. "Access the computer next to you and start downloading telemetry straight to the Path Finder. Activate a holographic terminal here for us to see what the SaLing Bridge crew sees."

A holographic terminal interface appeared in front of them and the SaLing Bridge appeared around them. Garcia and Kitara scrutinized the material.

"They're traveling at full impulse. They should achieve orbit in ten minutes," Kitara said.

"Do you know this system?" Garcia said.

"I know where it is, but I did not know that there was a class M planet there, capable of supporting life," Kitara said. "It's ten light years from the Orion system. What is particularly interesting about this system is that the solar radiation prevents warp drive from working within the boundaries of the heliosphere. All ships are forced out of warp if they cross the helio pause, and must continue in at impulse. The same radiation will make scanning into the system difficult and render traditional cloaking devices useless. An appropriately aligned sensor grid could detect incoming ships, giving sufficient warning for someone at this planet to make an exit or prepare for a battle."

"What about transwarp?" Garcia asked.

"I don't know," Kitara said. "If we can't jump in, we should at least be able to jump out, provided of course, we are in the shadow of a planet."

"How soon will it take us to get there at best warp?" Garcia asked.

"Three hours," Kitara said. "The New Constitution could be there in one hour."

"We could be there right now if we use the Gateway," Garcia said.

"There are five ships in orbit, including the ship you met Bliss on," Kitara said. "Plus a total of sixty orbital batteries orbiting the planet. I can't determine the ground capabilities without activating the scanners and that would give us away, but let's assume they're formidable. At any rate, if we board the SaLing and they get a message off to any of the other ships, they will most probably destroy it. I recommend that we rendezvous with the New Constitution, power into the system at full impulse, and as they're preparing to meet us in battle we board the SaLing. That will improve the odds for success."

"I concur," Garcia said. "Losira, terminate your agent. I'm closing the gate."

"Done," Losira said.

"Having a few more ships at our disposal might improve the odds," Garcia said.

"Indeed," Kitara said. "The K'tinga class starship that's in orbit?"

“Yeah, and the Romulan Bird of Prey,” Garcia said.

Kitara scoffed. “Why would you want that? The last model of that type rolled off the assembly line in 2268.”

“Yes, but lets assume for a moment that Bliss has done business with these ships,” Garcia said. “It might cause them to hesitate.”

“To expedite the elimination of the crews and make the ships active again, you will have to use your Kelvan computer,” Kitara said.

Garcia nodded, biting his lip as he reached under his sleeve to touch the button. The Kelvan bracelet provided him the connection with the Kelvan computer and in less than two heart beats he had transferred the crews from the two ships he intended to steal and dispersed them amongst the other ships. He then repaired the damage Losira had done and relased them from the Kelvan immobilization process so that they would function as designed. And then it occurred to Garcia that it might be possible to miniaturize the remaining ships and stow them on the Path Finder, as if they were nothing more than models. He talked himself out of it and left them alone. He felt Kitara’s hands on his wrists and his world view was shattered when she pulled his arms apart.

Garcia gasped and refocused on her. “How dare you!” he snapped.

“You accomplished your goals,” Kitara said. “I didn’t want you tarrying longer and risking unconsciousness again.”

“I will decide what’s best for me and this ship,” Garcia said, pushing with his wrists.

Kitara resisted, pushing back with equal force, moving in closer to him and locking his arms by tangling them so that it looked like she was hugging him. To her surprise, he bit her. She wrestled him to the floor and their struggle turned into intimacy. When they were done and both calmer, Garcia realized why she had interrupted him. Under the influence of the Kelvan computer, he had taken the liberty to change her uniform. She had been wearing the Path Finder Uniform that they had co-designed, but now she was wearing the Klingon armor and dress from early twenty third century. He became conscious of new wounds, physical and emotional as he probed his embarrassment.

“Does it always have to end this way?” Garcia asked, rubbing his jaw.

“It is our way,” Kitara said.

Garcia closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Kitara was dressing into an appropaiate uniform which she had ordered through the replicator system. Once she was dressed, she disposed of the outdated uniform.

“I have work to do,” Kitara said, and departed the room.

Garcia sighed. He stood up on his own power, adjusting slowly due to his new pains, and then went to the Bridge. The commandeered ships were manned and on their way before the Enterprise was in scanning distance, thanks to Kitara’s efficiency. Garcia sent a coded message to Picard explaining what he knew about the remaining Starburst and that he was on his way to retrieve it. He also sent a coded message for the New Constitution to rendezvous with them at the solar system Bliss called home. The Path Finder and the Pa Nun followed the commandeered ships, synchronizing their warp speeds so that they would arrive shortly after they did.

This was it, Garcia decided. The final game was in play. Kitara arrived on the Bridge and crossed to her station, not bothering to look at Garcia. Garcia rubbed his

forehead, knowing full well that he had made his life a whole lot more complicated, once again. He decided to retire to his Ready Room.

"Number One, the Bridge is yours," Garcia said, without looking at her.

McKnight exchanged glances with Trini. Trini shrugged.



Garcia was on the Bridge when the commandeered ships dove into the star system, full impulse, in addition to the Pa Nun, while the New Constitution and Path Finder held back. At a quarter of the way in, their cloaks failed. Half way to their destination, Bliss tried contacting them. When no one returned Bliss's hails, the ships in orbit around his planet took up a defensive posture, including the SaLing.

Garcia opened a channel to his Shuttle Bay. "Gowr, take your team in now," Garcia said. "Trini, signal the New Consitution and have them proceed in system."

"Done, they're on their way," Trini said. "The Enterprise should arrive in twenty more minutes."

The Einstein's crew on the New Constitution still didn't know about the Path Finder, and if at all possible, they would still not know when the mission was over. Lt. Undine had explained to them that Garcia was on the Pa Nun with Kitara and a team that would be boarding the SaLing to retake it. Glor and Gowr were now in on Garcia's secret, the Path Finder.

"Helm, full impulse into the system," Garcia instructed. "Activate primary cloaking system."

The Path Finder passed the New Consitution as it dove sunwards into the system. Its secondary cloak failed, just as the other ships cloaks had failed, but their primary cloak worked on different principles, and merely allowed light to pass through the skin, as opposed to creating a field of energy around the ship. Consequently, it wasn't affected and though the Path Finder could be detected, it would take someone who was very diligent and who knew what they were looking for to do it.

"Captain, I have detected an additional twenty ships on long range scans. They will arrive here in thirty two minutes," Kitara said. "They're Gorn, First Strike class starships."

"Bloody hell, do I have to kill every last Gorn before they leave me in peace?" Garcia asked. He unconsciously grabbed the hand grips at the end of his arm rest. He became aware that he was griping the arm rests as he twisted the Velcro sleeves he had put on the grips to prevent him from accidentally touching the Kelvan interface during the battle. The sleeves worked, but he felt slightly annoyed by their presence. He twisted them, aching to rip them off to get access. He noticed Kitara observing his hands and he let go of the grips. He extracted a piece of gum from his sleeve and said, "Show me their most likely path into this system."

Kitara complied and brought up the projected path for the Gorn's entry into the system. It came up on the secondary viewer, while the main viewer continued to show their progress into the system.

"McKnight, bring us about and drive us down that path," Garcia instructed.

"Number one, Contingency Plan C."

"Implementing Plan C," Kitara said, pushing a series of buttons on her terminal. Six minutes later, Kitara announced the completion of her assignment. "Done."

“Helm, bring us back around and head for the planet, full impulse. As soon as we enter orbit, I want you to park us under the SaLing, as close as you can get without touching. Kitara, prepare to fire one quantum photon torpedo. I want it to look like the SaLing did it. Aim at the closest enemy ship.”

“Aye,” Kitara said.

The Path Finder fell into place and just as the enemy ship next to them prepared to launch torpedoes at the New Constitution, Kitara blasted them with a quantum torpedoe. The enemy ship spun slightly on its axis and its torpedo went astray. The Path Finder then observe the communications between the two ships increased in volume as the Captains argued about who was on who’s side. During the argument, the SaLing’s transmission ended abruptly. Losira nodded to Garcia.

“We have the SaLing back,” Losira announced.

“Losira, I need your agents on the ground,” Garcia said. “Sabotage the base security. Don’t kill any one. Helm, surrender controls to Losira. Losira, attach us to the bottom of the SaLing. As soon as the holographic clamps are in place, plug into their internal com. system and contact the Bridge.”

“See if you can turn off those damn orbital batteries, while you’re at it” Kitara added.

“Hey, I’m working as fast as I can here,” Losira said, a heavy New York accent.

“Gowr here,” Gowr said, his image appearing on one of the monitors on a pedestal to Garcia’s right. “Where are you?”

“Underneath you,” Garcia said. “Continue with your battle. We need to wrap this up fast because we have more enemy coming.”

“I am ready for them,” Gowr said. “But I have nothing on scanners.”

“The radiation of this solar system is interfering with the sensors,” Kitara said. “We detected them as we made our dive in. No doubt they were waiting to ambush us, but jumped to warp a bit soon, and we were lucky to see them.”

Garcia interrupted “I will be using some experimental weapon systems from my end. They should enhance your battle plans without interfering with your tactics. Just stay open for suggestions from me. Now, Trini, hail the planet. Hail everybody.”

“You’re on,” Trini said.

“Bliss, this is Captain Garcia, of the IKV SaLing, working under a joint Federation Klingon commission,” Garcia said. “Have your men stand down. I have been given the authority to take you into custody for crimes against our two nations.”

“No response,” Trini said, after a moment.

“Kitara, take an Away Team down to the planet, phasers on stun,” Garcia said, emphasizing the stun. “I don’t want any innocents hurt, but don’t assume the slaves are innocent. They could be trained to defend Bliss. Knock them out, too, if you feel it necessary. I want Bliss alive.”

Kitara nodded, called her team from where she stood, waited for them all to signal ready, and then she triggered the transporter. She was transported off the Bridge and directly to the planet below. Each member of her Away team was also transported, site to site, from wherever they were, without going to the transporter room. It was a great time saver, and they were already dressed in their best battle gear, weapons at their side, knowing they would most probably be called to duty. Tuer stepped up to take Kitara’s place after she transported out.

McKnight said something that brought Garcia's attention back to the screen. Two of the ships were focusing their fire power on the New Constitution, forcing her to dive closer towards the planet and the orbital batteries. The batteries were mostly a nuisance, pinging the ship's shields with short phaser bursts. Still, enough pings could overwhelm the shields and cause them to fail and then every hit after that would start to really hurt. It didn't help matters when two other ships were tossing their share of ammo at you.

"I see it," Garcia said. "Gowr, put us between the NC and those ships."

"Aye, Admiral," Gowr agreed, enthusiastic about doing so.

"Keep the anti photon torpedoes system hot," Garcia instructed.

The anti torpedo system was completely automatic, since no known organic creature could detect and respond fast enough to torpedoes, but a team had to keep rearming all the system by inserting the stinger type missiles. The system began firing at every torpedo in range, causing them to detonate prematurely. The explosions created radiation that fluoresced the shields, but it was less radiation than a full strike would have given. There were so many exploding torpedoes that torpedoes were beginning to detonate just from the all the energy being released, for it wasn't just the enemy's torpedoes, but torpedoes from the New Constitution as well, as they were all seen by the Path Finder's systems as non-Path Finder torpedoes.

"This is even more fun than missile command," Losira said.

Only Garcia knew her reference. "Stay focused," Garcia said. "Garcia to Undine."

"Here, Captain," Lt. Undine answered.

"Put that dead ship between you and those batteries," Garcia said. "In fact, just park on the other side of it and match its orbital speed. We got your back."

"Aye," Undine said.

"The Enterprise has joined in the fight," McKnight announced. "It's just the Battle Bridge! They must have left the saucer section at Sherman's planet. It's hailing everyone."

"This is Captain Picard. You will cease all hostilities this instant," Picard ordered. The enemy responded by firing at the Enterprise.

"Garcia here. I tried that, Captain. They're not receptive to standing down," Garcia said.

"Yeah, well, we're about to have a lot more company," Picard said.

"The Gorn?" Garcia said.

"Right on our heels," Picard said.

"I got them on sensors now," Sendak said.

"Gowr, take us out of orbit, quarter impulse, towards the Gorn at one two one, mark one one zero," Garcia instructed.

"Only a quarter impulse?" Gowr said. "I could be on top of them in thirty seconds..."

"Stand by," Garcia said, watching the ships roll in along the projected flight path, and counting. "Losira, light it up."

"Transmitting," Losira said.

All along the projected flight path of the Gorn incursion, nuclear weapons flared. They were small enough not to be detected on sensors due to the radiation in in this system, and they were strategically placed along the path of the Gorn ships had been

predicted to take. The Gorn tightened up their formation to try and ride out the nuclear blast waves, and that's when the four matter anti matter bombs went off. When the intensity of the light faded, four Gorn ships were destroyed, eight were crippled, and none of the ships had any shields left due to the explosions. The remaining ships continued on, with two falling out of formation and colliding, taking them out of the game as well.

"Gowr, hail the Gorn and tell them Captain Garcia isn't here to play and that they should go home," Garcia said.

The Gorn responded. "Garcia, you are the Destroyer of Worlds, and you will be eliminated," the Gorn responded.

"Turn us around, Gowr," Garcia said. "We'll allow the orbital batteries to thin them out a little more, which won't be too hard now that their shields are gone."

"Yeah, and thanks for not letting me jump right in there," Gowr said. "That was absolutely stunning work."

"We got lucky," Garcia said.

"Admiral," Trini said. "Kitara is paging."

"On audio," Garcia said.

"We have Bliss pinned down," Kitara reported. "But he has hostages. I can't get in there without hurting any of them. Do you want to use the Klevan transporter to end the stalemate?"

"Throw Bliss a communicator," Garcia said.

"Done," Kitara said.

"Bliss, this is Captain Garcia," Garcia said. "Allow me to let you leave this place with some dignity. If you don't surrender, I will be forced to carry you out unconscious. It's over, Bliss. Give up"

"You like opera?" Bliss said.

"We're not having a cosy little chat amongst friends and colleagues," Garcia said. "Your surrender is non negotiable."

"If you like opera, you know that it is not over until the fat lady sings," Bliss said.

"What is he talking about?" Kitara asked.

"I will not be taken alive," Bliss said. "But not only that, I'm going to kill you and all your friends in the process."

Garcia shook his head in disappointment, but he was not surprised. He was about to order Kitara to move in on him when Sendak interrupted.

"Garcia, I am detecting an unusual energy pattern," Sendak said. "Sir, it's the Starburst. He's activated it."

"Enterprise to Garcia," Picard hailed them. "We've just detected the Genesis energy wave. It's on a build up to detonation."

"I see it," Garcia said. "Losira, can it be deactivated?"

"Negative," Losira said. "We have less than five minutes to reach minimum safe distance."

"There's no way, Tam!" McKnight said. "We can't go to warp inside this system!"

The SaLing took a hit by a Gorn ship. The Orion pirates were now trying to flee the area, but the Gorn were going to fight to the death to take Garcia out, and the best way to guarantee that objective was met was to destroy everyone.

“Damn it,” Garcia said. “Gowr, take them out! Captain Picard? Data? Can we blow it up to prevent it from reaching critical mass?”

“Negative,” Data responded. “It will only cause it to detonate early. And the wave inhibits transport, so we can’t move it or convert it into energy in an attempt to diffuse it over a large volume of space.”

“Listen up, Tam. Beam your people up and head out of the system at max-impulse,” Picard said. “We might make it.”

Losira shook her head.

“Gowr, head us for the dark side of the planet, full impulse,” Garcia said, ripping the Velcro sleeves off the grips of his chair.

A Gorn ship was making a suicide run for the SaLing. “Helm, evasive action,” Garcia heard Gowr’s voice over the comm.

“Gowr, ignore them and head towards the dark side of the planet,” Garcia instructed. “I’m going to fix this.”

“Activating holographic projectiles,” Losira announced.

The Path Finder surrounded itself and the SaLing with holographic objects that orbited the ship at high velocity. These objects orbited outside the range of the shields, making their orbits more elliptical than they would be had they just been going around the Path Finder. As ordered, Gowr ignored the approaching Gorn on his run for the dark side. As the Gorn ship approached, intending to ram the SaLing, the holographically generated projectiles orbiting the two ships shredded the forward section of the Gorn ship as if it had come in contact with a high speed propeller. The objects also punched holes in the ship, making it look like swisscheese. Air escaped the holes, becoming clouds as the water vapor in the air froze.

“Garcia, get your people off the planet and make a run for it,” Picard ordered a second time.

“No time,” Garcia said. “Stand by for a miracle.”

Garcia tore the Velcro sleeves off his arm rest, took hold of the grips, and was instantly raised in awareness. He ticked off everything he needed to do in sequence. The first thing he did was immobilize the Gorn on their ships, and then transferred them to the Path Finder, filling the shuttlebay with Gorn colored polyhedra. After that, he transported the entire crew of the Path Finder and the SaLing over to the Enterprise, spreading them throughout the ship. He took the Klingons frozen in Polyhedra form from the SaLing and put them on the Path Finder as well. He then reached out to the planet with his Kelvan sensors, found the Starburst and brought it up to the Path Finder. His mind was very aware of the clock ticking down, bright red. His mind was splintered with all the activity about him, watching the options come and go as he made decisions.

Bliss was still holding out, Kors was his prime hostage, and he had already killed one of the Orion Slave Girls to make a point. The only thing holding Kitara back was Garcia’s orders not to kill any of the slaves, and she especially wanted to keep Kors alive, because of Garcia’s prior instructions to rescue her. With a simple wish, Garcia transported Kors out of harms way while simultaneously reducing Bliss to his essential elements, minus the water. Kors fell forward and began crying as Garcia’s team rushed in to secure the area. All through the base, Garcia turned Bliss’s personnel and soldiers into polyhedra.

The Pirate ships trying to escape were disabled and transported back into orbit, their crews incapacitated, frozen in place, aware of everything but unable to act.

"Are you crazy!" Duana asked him. It was the first time he had heard his mental companions while engaged with the Kelvan device. She pointed to the timer on the clock.

He heard Losira whimpering, "I must survive."

"Losira, trust me," Garcia said, his mind jumping from information set to information set.

He saw Kletsova trying to comfort Kors, who was crying from sheer relief that her ordeal was finally over. She had been mentally brutalized by Bliss over and over, to keep her in line. Physical torture would have been kinder, but that was not the way of Bliss. He considered squashing the polyhedra that was once Bliss.

He heard Data say: "Sensors are showing that the Genesis Device has been relocated to the SaLing."

Garcia saw Troi, the real Troi, sit down hard, pulling her knees to her chest, her feet in the chair. She closed her eyes and tried to send him positive thoughts. She wiped a tear.

Picard put things together based on his counselor's reaction. "He's going to make a death run. He's attempting to put some distance between us and the device. Have all functioning ships travel in the opposite direction."

"No," McKnight, who had beamed to the Enterprise's Bridge, said. "He's going to try and use the transwarp drive on the dark side of the planet. The shields will drop momentarily right before the transwarp drive is activated, making him a sitting duck."

"There's a full contingent of orbital batteries on that side," Data agreed with McKnight's analysis, pointing out the obvious. Most of the space battle had happened on the light side of the planet and consequently, the batteries had been thinned out in the ensuing battle.

"Full impulse, target all batteries, ram them if you have to," Picard ordered.

Garcia heard Glor on the Pa Nun giving similar orders to support Garcia in his death run, too, cursing that Garcia was always hogging all the glory.

Garcia reconsidered the orbital batteries. He hadn't considered them a threat until this moment, but instead of destroying them he simply turned them off at the switch at the main control room of the Bliss complex.

"Tam?" it was his mental Troi. "We will do this together. All my love is with you." He wasn't sure if the mental Troi was echoing the real Troi's sentiments or it was her own. They were the same personality, but divergent from the point she was created and down loaded into his head. There was still a psychic bond between Garcia and the real Troi, but he had never been real sure how much the two Troi's shared. He examined the possibility of moving her from his mind and making her real. That wasn't an option, but he could mind meld with Losira computer system and allow her holographic generating capabilities to manifest all of his mental companions, at least on the Path Finder. On the Path Finder, they could be real, no longer still stuck in his brain. They would have more personal freedom than they currently enjoyed and he could have more of his mind back, but the down side was that he would have to become one with Losira.

"Can we transwarp jump with both ships in tandem?" Lal asked.

The Kelvan computer had made computations suggesting that it was possible, but Garcia didn't like the odds. They had a narrow window on the dark side of the planet where the radiation was sufficiently decreased to allow him to use the transwarp drive. Once it was activated he would be out of the system, as opposed to the regular warp drive where the moment he left the planet's shadow he would fall out of warp.

"Tam, are you going to wait till the damn thing hits zero before you do anything?!" Duana demanded.

Ilona sat down at the helm and kicked her feet up, whistling as she filed her nails.

"Tam, I'm afraid," Losira said. With Garcia hooked to the Kelvan computer, she could interact with him at speeds approaching the true limit of her computer speeds. It was not a true mind meld, but it was so close that it allowed her to sample what it was like to be human, and it was affecting her in ways she hadn't thought possible. "I know love, I know life, I want to survive. Please."

"We will survive," Garcia assured her. "Activate the Path Finder's holographic feature, overlapping our SaLing skin with the SaLing. Good, activate the real SaLing's cloaking device. Program the computer to keep it on the dark side."

"Complying," she said.

No one noticed the real SaLing going invisible for its cloak went up simultaneously as the Path Finder's holographic skin came online.

"Tam," Losira said. "Survival alone is insufficient if I can't share it with someone. I need you."

"I know," Garcia said, allowing his mind to merge with hers. A telepathic link was established with Losira increasing the exchange rate of information, faster than his implant and faster than the Kelvan computer could allow. Still, Losira had to create a program inhibitor to keep the rate of exchange between her and Garcia's brain at a lower threshold than she would have preferred. Over that threshold, Garcia's mind would burn out. "Release docking clamps and power us away, prepare for the jump to transwarp."

"Destination?" Losira asked. But she knew. They both wanted the same goal: protect the Federation and Klingon Empire.

Garcia smiled and closed his eyes. He could see better with the Kelvan computer than he could ever see with his own eyes. He gave the coordinates.

"Tam, no!" Duana said. Her voice was real. All of his mental companions were now capable of manifesting themselves through the Path Finder's holographic emitters. They were all one with the ship.

"It's about time," Ilona said. "A little Borg revenge."

"I have tasted life," Losira said. "Internal conflict. I have my orders but I am opposed to this action."

"It must be done," Ilona said.

"Just drop it off in deep space," Duana said.

"Don't do it, Tam," Losira said.

"I'm afraid," Lal said.

"Engage," Garcia said, his mind made up.



The Borg occupation was going splendidly well, from the Borg standpoint. All the non Borg on the planet had given up fighting the invasion. They were now in hiding, trying to hold out as long as they could. Their only hope was that once the Borg had

stolen everything useful, they would leave, and they could eek out a miserable existence while the planet recovered from the environmental damage the Borg were causing.

The Path Finder arrived in TelKiar space. Garcia observed the Borg and was fascinated with them the same way a child might be fascinated by a beehive. Garcia surveyed the planet, counting the Borg and the non Borg. His mind was awash with the voices of his mental companions, plus Losira, each giving their opinion and assessment. He couldn't save everyone, but with Losira's help he could save maybe forty thousand people. He chose a sample of the unaffected populations, an even mix of male and female, mostly children, and brought them up to the Path Finder. The only feasible way to accommodate so many was to reduce them to their essential elements, minus the water. Almost every available space of the Path Finder was filled with polyhedra, stacked from floor to ceiling in some compartments, and wasite deep in others. Only time prevented him from rescuing more people.

"You have less than a minute to make a decision," Losira said.

Garcia opened a channel to the Borg. "On behalf of the Klingon and Romulan Empires, and the United Federation of Planets, you are hereby ordered to cease all attempts to assimilate life forms in the Alpha Quadrant. This is your last warning. Any further attempts to assimilate our people will be considered an act of aggression and we will be forced to retaliate. We will destroy you."

A Borg ship homed in on the transmission source. Two ships began to orientate towards the SaLing hologram. They had previously ignored it, due to its lack of mass, but now that it was broadcasting, it was a curiosity that couldn't be dismissed.

"You will be assimilated," the Borg said, scanning the SaLing skin but finding it empty of substance. With both cloaks operating, the Path Finder was easily over looked, but it also helped that the ship was phase shifted out of alignment with normal matter so even if they could be detected, there would be no way to achieve a transporter lock or a hold with a tractor beam. Still, the Borg tried, lancing out with lasers and tractor beams. "Resistance is futile."

Satisfied that sufficient time for his warning to be fully absorbed into the Borg consciousness had passed, Garcia deployed the active Starburst. Outside of the influence of the phase shift field, it returned to its normal space time matter alignment. Borg ships orientated on the device, scanning it. A Borg ship grabbed at it and grabbed it with a tractor beam to bring it in closer. The Genesis energy was almost at its critical threshold and was making scans impossible. The Borg simply did not understand what was about to hit them, otherwise all of their ships capable of warp speed would be on their way out of the system. Moments before the device detonated, Garcia activated the regular warp drive. At warp one point five, he preceeded the Genesis blast wave out of the system. He dropped out of warp beyond the effective range of the device, pausing only long enough to log the devastation. All Borg ships were vaporized. The Borg occupied planet received a complete surface makeover, leaving no trace of any living systems, due in part to the original Genesis Device design which reduce things to their basic form to rebuild it in favor of its new form. Only that's where the restructuring process ended. The Starburst was a more efficient planet killer than even the Doomsday machine, for when Garcia put in his ship logs that no life was left, he meant none. Not even a single microbe was left to perhaps one day repopulate the planet with its kind and evolve into a new ecosystem. The atmosphere was gone. The water was gone. It was a sterile planet,

with no sanctuary for life as the Starburst radiation continued to radiate the planet to its core, leveling mountains and filling valleys so that it was a perfect sphere of loose molecules, shifting like liquid sand. It would matter that life had no sanctuary here. Six months from now the planet would completely be destroyed, contracting in on itself and then exploding, as if every atom and molecule had been magnetically polarized to repel away from all other atoms affected by the initial genesis energy.

Garcia was the Destroyer of Worlds.

Garcia deactivated the SaLing skin, delaying his departure in order to study the effects in an attempt to better understand the ramifications of what he had done. There was a part of him that actually liked the efficiency and the total devastation, particularly fascinated by how perfectly everything was demolished so that the entire planet's surface was an ocean of ash, so energized that it rippled consistent with the principles of fluid dynamics as it settled. He considered moving in closer to better examine the phenomenon, but the radiation inside the system was way too hot at this juncture in time. Satisfied that nothing more could be achieved, he activated the transwarp drive and jumped to a new system.



From orbit, the Romulan homeworld seemed rather peaceful, someplace Garcia might like to visit if the hostilities between their two governments ever ceased. The Romulan people weren't bad, just the government policies. It became difficult to keep his attention on his duties so many options were flying by. He did some small intelligence gathering while simultaneously liberating the TelKiar people he had rescued. The forty thousand people were placed gently on their feet in the center of a Romulan park, in a series of waves. Groups of people with nothing but the clothes on their back appeared, their clothes torn and dirty from the ravages of the war. There was a bit of confusion, but he was satisfied that they would be treated well, since the Romulans considered them citizens. The TelKiar people had been conquered hundreds of years ago, before there was even a Federation.

Garcia was tempted to leave the Romulans a data chip revealing the last moments of TelKiar, but decided to leave them guessing. He was also tempted to kidnap a Romulan mate that would be genetically compatible with his own genetic bias. As that thought occurred to him, he was certain for the first time that the Kelvans had hard wired a desire for him to be fruitful and multiply in order to continue with their experiment to make more humanoids capable of becoming Kelvan. When plugged into a Kelvan computer, this impulse was greatly magnified, which explained why he was so much more fascinated with the fairer sex and driven towards exploring romantic encounters. It was more than just a harmless obsession, where he virtually examined the physical aspects of potential partners with each profile generating possible combinations of genetic coupling that might produce the best offspring; it was a biological imperative bred into him. The fact that the Kelvan computer gave him the power to act on his impulses made him a danger to society at large. Further, the longer a Kelvan computer session went, the less self control he seemed to have.

It took a great deal of will power to force himself to suspend his search for the ultimate Romulan woman, even though he had narrowed it down to nearly ten thousand candidates. And since a person couldn't depend on will power alone to stay honest, due to the fact that will power waxed and wane just like the tides, as emotional and physical

energies waxed and waned, it was necessary for him to remove himself from so much temptation. A person shouldn't keep chocolate in hands reach if they have a weakness for it, especially when will power is on the lower end of waning.

Garcia activated the transwarp drive and made another jump.



The Path Finder appeared above Kronos, the Klingon's home planet. Admiral Sheaar was easy enough to find, thanks to Losira being able to lock in on his DNA profile. He reanimated the SaLing crew and set them down on their home planet and kidnapped Admiral Sheaar. Again there was an impulse to find a mate, but it lacked the potency that his impulse for the Romulans had taken. Perhaps his increased fascination for the Romulans was because they were forbidden fruit and not as readily available, or maybe because they are so similar to Vulcans, which almost guaranteed an intelligent offspring. Or, maybe he was less interested in a Klingon mate because he had already found the perfect Klingon woman; Kitara. Still, the longer he considered it, the more female Klingon Profiles appeared on his virtual screen, the information provided by direct Kelvan scans or from live databases of Klingon celebrities and single profiles that could be found online. The top ten profiles changed, as if it were warped game of solitaire.

Garcia activated the transwarp drive and jumped to Earth with Admiral Sheaar as a hostage. With the transwarp drive, jumping from Kronos to Earth took all of maybe four seconds. Using Losira's guidance, Admiral Pressman was equally easy to find and kidnap. He brought both Admiral Pressman and Admiral Sheaar to the Bridge. He held them with his Kelvan power as if they were nothing more than action figures that a child might play with.

Admirals Shear and Pressman stood before Garcia, effectively frozen, but able to hear and see. Unwilling to relinquish the Kelvan computer, Garcia appraised them from his chair, wondering if he should kill them both and be done with it, or find some use for them. He decided not to kill them. He had done enough killing today. His life was awash in blood, and he suspected the moment he let go of the Kelvan computer he would suffer for it, but for now, he felt nothing. He was immune to his human emotions and almost immune to his human conscience. Everything his mind processed had been reduced to pure formulas and equations. The choices were made through pure economical reasoning, exchange theory at its best.

"I have recovered both stolen weapons," Garcia said, his voice hollow, mechanical. His mind splintered with another tangent, and he heard a voice say, "Pay no mind to that man behind the curtain." Was that all he was, he wondered. With the Kelvan computer he raised their arms of his hostages and slipped data disks into their hands, as easily as manipulating puppets. "The Enterprise detected the G-device wave and are aware that the Genesis project has been reopened. Further, as the records I have given you will reveal, I have eliminated the immediate Borg threat at the TelKiar system. Now, I am going to go and save Admiral McCoy. When I am done, I am going to keep your secret little starship and make it look as if this project is over for good, effectively saving your necks. Consider the Path Finder permanently Silent Running, watching for our enemies, especially patriots who abuse their powers. What I want in return is a career in Star Fleet, with a joint commission from the Klingon Empire. Assign me to the USS New Constitution as her Captain. In addition to that, I want to keep my Klingon crew.

Are there any questions? I thought not. I don't have to tell you I'll be watching you, do I? Have a nice day, gentlemen."

Garcia returned both Admiral Sheaar and Admiral Pressman to Pressman's office. He was confident he had their complete attention. Garcia activated the transwarp drive before giving into his overwhelming impulse to find human partners. There were so many that fascinated him.



Cestus Three was the planet where Kirk had first met the Gorn. They had wiped out a Human colony and Kirk had been forced to defend the Federation. After the incident, the Federation, in the interest of keeping the peace, conceded that they had unintentionally violated Gorn space and surrendered all rights to the planet. In recognition of Kirk's mercy on the Gorn he faced in battle under the supervision of the Metrones, the Gorn had allowed a human colony to be established on Cestus Three, and the two species had shared it in peace ever since. Nearly a hundred years later, the Federation still maintained a sizable colony on the planet, and the Gorn had a thriving economic system, supporting one billion Gorn. Using the Path Finder's surveillance technology, aided by the Kelvan and Losira technology, Garcia began his search for Admiral McCoy. He nearly lost focus when he realized it might be possible to generate a human Gorn hybrid, using Kelvan technology. Potential Gorn mates began to appear on his virtual screen. He was saved from this tangent when he found where McCoy was being held prisoner.

McCoy was not alone. The Einstein's senior officer, who had rushed off to rescue him, were sharing McCoy's cell. He would be interested in hearing how they had been caught, but that was for later. He had to wrap up his plans before the Kelvan computer depleted all of his self control, sending him into madness. He gave himself a time limit, hoping the ticking of a virtual clock might force him to stay focus.

Garcia turned the polyhedra back into Gorn and transported them into the middle of a government meeting. Losira beamed into the court room as well and addressed them, speaking in the Gorn language.

"The war against Captain Tammias Garcia must stop. Let there be no more killing," Losira said. She disappeared as the Gorn authorities tried to apprehend her for disrupting a public hearing.

Simultaneously, Garcia sent a Losira agent to greet Admiral McCoy to prepare them to be transported. He did this because he did not want to surprise McCoy and cause him a heart attack by popping him into a new setting without his prior awareness.

"Admiral McCoy," Losira said. "I'm here for you."

"Gentlemen?" McCoy said, motioning for the Einstein Officer's to block her from touching him.

"So much for trying to avoid giving McCoy a heart attack," Duana commented.

"We will be using a Kelvan transporter to affect your rescue," Losira warned them.

In the blink of an eye they were transported to the holodeck on the Path Finder, which was simulating the bridge of the SaLing. In their simulation, a holographic Garcia was touching a Kelvan bracelet. "Stand by for transwarp," the holographic Garcia said. Garcia activated the SaLing skin for her final show to be witnessed by Picard and the Einstein crew aboard the New Constitution.

The Path Finder returned to the dark side of Bliss's planet. The Enterprise was in the process of reconnecting to the Saucer section, which had waited outside the star system in case the battle had gone badly. Garcia transported himself, McCoy, and the Einstein's senior officers to the battle bridge of the Enterprise. Garcia staggered forward and was met by Troi, who was coming to his aid almost as soon as he had appeared. He struggled to stay conscious.

"Detecting a build up of energy on the SaLing," Data announced. "It appears that the transwarp drive system has overloaded and activated the self destruct mechanism."

The SaLing began to blow up, falling into the atmosphere to help speed its demise.

"So much for any evidence to prosecute Sheaar and Singer with," Riker said.

"Tam, are you okay?" Troi asked.

Garcia nodded, shivering as if he were extremely cold. He held onto her for support, gazing deeply into her eyes. "I'm sorry," he said before passing out. "I am so sorry."

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

"Wake up!" Jurak yelled

Garcia sat up, reaching for his Kelvan bracelet. It was gone. Doctor Crusher eased him back down to the medical bed.

"You baby him too much," Jurak protested.

"This is my sickbay," Doctor Crusher said.

"He'll lie around all day if you let him," Jurak said.

"My head hurts," Garcia complained. "Can you lower the volume?"

"Tam?"

Garcia opened his eyes, squinting under the lights, to confirm he did indeed hear Admiral McCoy's voice. He forced himself up to try and greet him, but McCoy and Crusher eased him back down. McCoy took Garcia's hand. Jurak grunted his disapproval.

"Son," McCoy said. "No more Kelvan computers. Promise me."

Garcia nodded and again tried to sit up, Crusher tried to ease him back down, but he resisted. "No, I want to sit up," Garcia said.

"That's the spirit," Jurak said. "Fight. You are more Klingon than some of my own brothers!"

"Volume!" Garcia reminded his Doctor, motioning with his hand for Jurak to lower his voice, and wimpering with pain at his exertion. "Can you give me a shot?"

"It's not my first choice, no," Crusher said.

"At least dim the lights," Garcia asked.

"How long were you plugged into the Kelvan computer?" McCoy asked.

"I don't remember," Garcia said. "I took the Starburst away. I returned the Gorn to their planet. I rescued you, obviously."

Garcia slid off the bed and tried to stand. Crusher and McCoy tried to aid him but he motioned them away. He surveyed the room. Admiral McCoy, Captain Picard, Lt. Commander Riker, Lt. Commander Kitara, Doctors Crusher and Jurak, the real Counselor Troi, and Captain Henson were all present to witness Garcia's recovery, or perhaps his arrest. He was uncertain which would happen.

"Okay," Garcia said. "What is this? A Star Fleet convention?"

"As Commander of Star Fleet's flagship vessel, the USS Enterprise, I have been given the privilege of officially promoting you to the rank of Captain, with all the rites and privileges there of," Captain Picard said. "You are to be given command of the New Orleans class starship, recently rechristened the USS New Constitution. Your five year mission is to be an ambassador of good will for the Federation, carrying and delivering supplies to Starbases and long range research vessels, as well as providing for their Entertainment."

"In other words," Kitara scowled. "We've been demoted to Star Fleet band status. We're nothing more than traveling troubadors."

"Service is service," Garcia said.

"Aye," Kitara reluctantly gave in.

"Your first assignment, however, is to see that all the animals in the zoo below are returned to their proper environments," Picard said.

"We're giving this planet to the Grays," McCoy said. "The princess wants to stay here. I asked her if she wanted me to set up a permanent Star Fleet base for her

protection, but she is convinced that the Bliss facility, the remaining orbital batteries, and the natural defenses of this solar system will protect her. She has asked that you, personally, check in on her from time to time. Star Fleet is making you the official ambassador to the Grays.”

“I can do that,” Garcia said. “What happened to the SaLing?”

“It appears that the back to back jumps you made at transwarp over loaded the warp system and accidentally triggered the auto destruct sequence,” Picard said.

Garcia frowned as if he were unhappy about that, avoiding Kitara’s stare.

“Are we forgetting anything?” Picard asked Admiral McCoy.

“Yeah,” Henson answered up. “The part where he blew up my ship?!”

“We’ve been over that,” Picard said. “It was in self defense. I was a witness.”

“I managed to save your crew,” Garcia pointed out.

“That’s not the point and you know it,” Henson said. “That’s two Star Fleet ships you have destroyed, three if you count the SaLing. How do we know that wasn’t on purpose?!”

“Are you threatening my Captain?” Kitara asked, stepping forwards.

“No,” Henson said, back tracking a little. “All I’m saying is that ship, the SaLing, had a working transwarp drive and a Kelvan computer system, and if I am to believe Picard, it had Genesis Devices on it, which is a violation of the Federation Klingon treaty. Its destruction could be construed as tampering with evidence.”

“We’re all well aware of what it could mean,” Admiral McCoy said.

“Admiral Singer and Admiral Sheaar were investigating that matter, in a joint effort, and believe the matter is sufficiently resolved, thanks to Garcia and his team’s efforts. I think we should leave it at that,” Picard said. “It would appear that a rogue military agency over stepped their boundaries and got themselves killed by Orion pirates who stumbled upon their secret base. Thanks to Garcia, we have caught up with the said Pirates, and put a sizable dent in the Orion Slave Trade.”

“In other words, we’re just supposed to stay quiet and hope this blows over,” Henson said.

“In other words,” McCoy said.

“It still doesn’t undo the damage done to my ship,” Henson said.

“The loss of your ship had nothing to do with any of this,” McCoy said. “It was about me, Garcia, and the Gorn.”

“You’re welcome to have the New Constitution,” Garcia said.

“Are you crazy? It will take five years to completely reinstall the inertial dampeners to Star Fleet specs,” Henson said. “You blew up my ship! You were being courtmartialed for the destruction of the Philadelphia Freedom, you’ve destroyed who knows how many Gorn ships, and at least four Klingon ships! There seems to be a pattern here. And how do they reward you? They give you another ship.”

“All charges have been dropped, by the way,” Picard said. “The court martial proceedings are over.”

“Must be nice to have friends in high places,” Henson said.

Kitara growled. Garcia waved her to silence.

“Captain,” McCoy said. “That will be enough of that. Garcia earned this posting.”

Henson may not have liked Garcia, but he liked and trusted McCoy well enough to not push the matter any further. He turned and left Sickbay, reigning in his anger.

"Well, I suppose we're through with the official business," Picard said. "McCoy and I would like to speak with Garcia alone now."

Crusher went to her office and closed the door, while everyone else departed sickbay. Once the doors closed, Picard stepped authoritatively towards Garcia.

"Did you complete your mission objective," Picard said.

"I sent the Borg a very clear message," Garcia said.

"You mean, you deployed the Starburst at TelKiar?" Picard said. "You got all of them?"

"There are no more Borg in the TelKiar system. They were eliminated to the last one," Garcia said.

"Dear, God," McCoy said. "How many innocent lives were lost just to deliver this message?"

"Based on my cursory survey of the planet, there were perhaps a million sentient beings that had not been converted to Borg," Garcia answered. "The Borg population had risen to fourteen point two billion on the planet surface, nearly ninety six percent of the original population. There were signs that the TelKiar people had used nuclear weapons as a last ditch effort to stop the Borg, which only further decimated their own people and planet. It caused no harm to the Borg."

"It will be six months before any of our scientists confirm what happened," Picard said. "The Romulans will no doubt deny it."

"If they don't outright declare war against the Federation," Admiral McCoy said.

"I doubt they will do that," Picard said. "They will now know that the Starburst type weapon system exists and that we could, if pushed, use it against them. Further, they will speculate that we have working transwarp drive to deliver said weapon. But, more to the point, they also know that we did them a favor by eliminating the Borg incursion their space. Any retaliation towards us would require an admission that they had lost one of their planets to the Borg and that the Federation had come to their aid. They're not going to want that information to go public."

"In a gesture of good will, I managed to save forty thousand people, relocating them from TelKiar to Romulous," Garcia added. "There is enough circumstantial evidence that someone helped them."

"But they don't know it's you, right? I suppose it was only matter of luck that the Borg came after the Federation the first time, since they took out both Federation and Romulan outposts along the neutral zone in their incursion into our space," McCoy said.

Picard shook his head in disagreement. "It wasn't luck," Picard said. "After Q introduced me and my ship to the Borg, he delivered us to safety on a personal whim. Based on that encounter, the Borg imagined that we had perfected the transwarp drive and came looking for me. They didn't learn of that error until after I was assimilated."

"Here's the thing, Picard," Admiral McCoy said. "You were rescued and returned to normal. I imagine that there are examples of others who have been assimilated and also rescued. It seems reasonable to me that we should come up with an alternative to destroying them. If your computer gets a virus, you don't throw it away. You cure the computer by wiping out the virus. Tam, you saw how the Kelvan were able to defend against the Borg. Surely we can come up with something similar."

“Are you saying because I decimated the Kelvan population, I ruined a chance at building a defense against the Borg?” Garcia asked.

“No, I’m not saying that,” McCoy said. “I’m saying, Doctor to Doctor, you don’t have an effective cure if you kill the patient in the process. A million sentient beings, Tam. A million innocent people! But over fourteen billion that might have been saved with the right technology.”

“So, you’re saying I shouldn’t have destroyed the Borg at TelKiar?” Garcia asked.

McCoy looked away, bit his lips, and turned back. “You were following orders,” McCoy said. That answered Garcia’s question. McCoy would have preferred that the device had remained buried. “Maybe it had to be done, but I don’t have to like it, and I certainly am not going to support such lethal weapons of mass destruction. Admiral K and I had had this discussion years ago, about bringing the G-device back to use against an enemy. If he were still alive, I suspect he would be in charge of the Starburst project. It was bound to happen eventually, but as a Doctor, I have to believe there are some better options and we damn well better start finding them.”

“If the battle of TelKiar deters the Borg even one year, then I believe Garcia did what was necessary,” Picard said. “Only the history books will tell whether or not it was the right thing to do.”

“Indeed,” McCoy said. “It’s no secret I am opposed to this, Tam. I don’t believe for a moment the story that Sheer and Singer put forwards, so I will be looking further into the matter. You know how I like to meddle. Tell me your involvement in this is over. Tell me the Starburst project is really dead.”

“The project is dead,” Garcia said.

McCoy hugged Garcia. “I’m glad you’re alive. Picard is taking me back to Earth. You’re in charge of the clean up here. The Princess wants to make this her new home and I agree that this is a good choice. With the solar radiation blocking detailed scans, she may be able to hide from the Preservers long enough to get a stable population of Grays going. Plus, the limitations to warp drive in this system gives her time to prepare against potential intruders, should that happen, or time to escape.”

“There are pirates that are aware of the planet and the Bliss base of operation,” Garcia said.

“I doubt the pirates we apprehended will be doing any more pirating,” Picard said. “It’s too bad Bliss escaped and can’t join them in some hard labor on a prison planet.”

“Yeah, too bad,” Garcia agreed, not revealing his secret. He wondered if Kitara collected the Bliss polyhedron and was keeping it safe somewhere, or if she simply disposed of it. If Garcia had his way, he would grind it into dust and make a sand portrait in a glass jar and set it adrift in space. “What about the Orion slaves?”

“I will be taking some of them back to Orion,” Picard said. “I don’t have room for all of them, since my hands are full with the pirates. Some of slaves are requesting to stay on here. They grew up here and they don’t want to leave.”

“The Princess says they can stay,” McCoy said. “I asked her if she wanted me to assign a contingent of Star Fleet Officers here, but she only wants you. All transactions and correspondence between her and Fleet are to be done through you. Perhaps you will check in on her from time to time?”

"I am sure that can be arranged," Garcia said. "I bet Glor might be willing to retire here, which would offer her a little more protection than just orbital batteries. I'll take care of her, though. Captain, do you have room for all the pirates?"

"No," Picard said. "So we crammed the remaining in one of the pirate ships and will be towing that with us when we leave. I have an Away Team on the planet surveying the Bliss base for any illegal weapons we can add to our list of offenses. You don't know how big a dent you have made in the Orion slave trade. I suspect when the Orion Senate has finished evaluating all that was done, they'll be giving you a medal."

Garcia scoffed at that. "Please, I suspect the Orion Government has been complicit in the trafficking of Orion Slave Girls. It's one of their only commodities. Look at how many web sites they have offering mail order Orion women. What is the likelihood that all these green women found in new colonies actually being there because they fell in love with an Andorian or Human or Klingon?"

"I hear you have one," McCoy said. "She imprinted on you?"

"Yes," Garcia said, sighing. "I opened her container, so I was the first one she saw when the stasis field cut off. What kind of drug do they give them to force an imprint on people?"

"It's a concentrated concoction with the primary ingredient being Elasian tears, injected directly into the blood stream after her transport container is closed. They activate the stasis field as soon as the potion has had time to circulate through the blood," McCoy said.

"Elasian tears?" Garcia asked. "You mean like Elaan, from Elas, who used her tears to make Kirk fall in love with her kind of tears? What did she do, drop it in his drink?"

"No, he merely touched her tears while she was crying," McCoy said. "Crocodile tears, no doubt."

"Don't Elasian tears only make males fall in love with the person that's crying?" Picard asked.

"Elaan actually fell in love with Kirk, and that was partly due to her own tears making her more susceptible to his charms," McCoy said. "And yes, her tears were more effective on Kirk because it carried with it samples of her DNA to help create a binding agent, fixating Kirk specifically to her. The love potion that the slave traders create have had all genetic information that might make a person fixate on the person who generated the tears removed, leaving them to imprint on the first person they see, smell, and touch. Each level of contact reinforces the bond."

"Will Ori grow out of it as she learns more?" Garcia asked.

McCoy shook his head. "Neural enhancement programs will enable her to have more independence, but she will never fully recover from the imprinting. Separated from their masters or mates, most slaves simply give up the will to live. They become depressed and stop eating. Treatment plans vary from putting them on a life time regiment of anti depressants to imprinting them on a new mate, which doesn't always take. It depends on how strong the initial bond was and how much time was spent reinforcing that bond. The love potion is rarely used on Slaves as it greatly decreases their resell value. I suspect Bliss wanted Ori permanently attached to you so that you would be implicit in slave trading. You would have to kill her to get rid of her or keep her near you, which means either way he has you complicit in slave trading."

Garcia rubbed his forehead. He was going to have to monitor the Orion Slave girls on Planet Bliss to make sure none had been imprinted on Bliss himself. If any were, he was either going to have to keep Bliss alive for the optimum health of the slaves, or Garcia was going to have to have them all imprinted onto him or another willing participant. Or start dispensing antidepressants left and right. Or combinations there of. His head hurt. "Speaking of new mates," Garcia said. "Have you met your grandchildren?"

"Grandchildren?" McCoy asked. "Are you speaking of Rivan? She's not due for another four months at the least and I'm certain she is not having twins."

"Not Rivan," Garcia said. Garcia told him about the five Glean offspring, the results of coupling with Karsat. McCoy seemed stunned, and Garcia assumed it was from McCoy discovering he was a grandfather, again, and at his age!

"I didn't think Glean and Human were genetically compatible," Picard said.

"They aren't," McCoy said.

"Apparently, when the Kelvan created me, they made sure I was extremely... potent," Garcia said. "I suppose I was so close their ideal specimen that they had to ensure that they could breed me with different combinations of species in order to produce better and better results. Whatever they did, my annual birth control shot is insufficient to prevent me from impregnating people. Rivan's pregnancy alerted me to this fact. I was only three months into the shot when Rivan and I... Well, you know. There's no telling how many kids I would have sired by now had I not been on birth control."

"If this is true, you're just going to have to limit your partners from now on," McCoy said.

"That's not going to happen," Garcia assured McCoy.

"You're not James T Kirk, you know," McCoy snapped.

"Um, maybe I should leave you two alone," Picard said, uncomfortable being in the middle of what appeared to be a family discussion.

"Why does everyone keep comparing me to Kirk?" Garcia asked. "What? Did he have a girl in every port?"

"What Kirk did or didn't do is irrelevant," McCoy said. "We're talking about you and your behavior. If you have to have variety, use your imagination or the holodeck. I am too old to be warping all over the quadrant just to see new grand babies!"

"I thought you might like knowing the McCoy legacy goes on," Garcia said.

"You thought that, uh?" McCoy asked. "And so, you think you have a five year mission to just repopulate the Kelvan species all on your own?"

"Having run them almost to the verge of extinction, I owe them that much, don't you suppose?" Garcia asked.

"I'll be on the Bridge if the two of you need me," Picard said, backing out.

"No, I don't suppose," McCoy said. "Don't make me call Spock to come counsel with you."

"Like Spock is going to talk with me about reproduction etiquette," Garcia said. "And even if he were willing to speak about it, I think he would be understanding of the madness that drives me to Pon Farr."

"He would understand the madness if it were at seven year intervals, as opposed to seven minutes intervals," McCoy said.

Picard escaped and the doors whispered shut behind him.

"I can go more than seven minutes," Garcia said.

"Without thinking about sex?" McCoy asked.

"I didn't say anything about not thinking about it," Garcia corrected. "Why are we even having this conversation? I can't believe I'm talking to you about sex."

"I'm a Doctor, damn it," McCoy said. "I know about sex. I even remember having it once or twice in my life."

"Dad," Garcia said. He shivered, trying to get the thought of it out of his head. "Why don't we just go to Ten Forward and have a drink. I bet I could even arrange to have one of the best bottles of Romulan Ale brought up from the Bliss compound."

"Now that sounds lovely," McCoy said.

Garcia waved to Doctor Crusher as they left. Crusher nodded, shaking her head sadly as she reclined in her seat, tapping the desk with her pencil. She didn't know what they had been arguing about, but if it was bad enough to drive Picard to sneaking out of the room then it probably had something to do with reproduction. They arrived in Ten Forward and pushed up to the bar. Guinan came up, holding a bottle of Romulan Ale.

"This bottle just amazingly appeared in my office several hours ago," Guinan said. "Now either it is just a strange coincident that the two of you arrive shortly after, or I'm being set up."

"You're being set up," McCoy said.

"But because we love you so much, we are willing to drink the evidence to prevent you from getting into trouble for having an illegal substance in your bar," Garcia said.

"Oh, you would do that for me?" Guinan asked.

"Hell, yes," McCoy said.

Guinan gave them the queerest look Garcia could ever remember her giving, but she pulled out a couple of glasses and began to pour the Ale. She paused for a moment.

"Tam, should you be drinking so soon after your ordeal?"

"I'm hoping it will ease my headache," Garcia said.

"No," McCoy said. "She's right. He'll have a glass of water with a touch of lemon and you'll make mine a double. Did he tell you what he's done to me?"

"What did he do to you?" Guinan asked, pushing the glass of Ale to him.

"He gone and made me a grandfather, five times over," McCoy said.

"Well congratulations," Guinan said.

"That's five reasons why I should get a glass of ale," Garcia protested. "You think five human children are a headache, you should see five Glean kids. They're like damn raccoons, into everything they can get into, sleep all day, up all night, and their feet and hands have this sticky stuff that allows them to crawl up the walls and hang from the ceiling. I don't know how Karsat has kept sane keeping track of them before I assigned a security detail to them. So, give me a drink."

"Not today," Guinan said. "I suspect Aahla would agree with me on this."

"Who's Aahla?" McCoy asked.

"Aahla is my pet, Royal Bengal Tiger," Garcia said.

"I thought you were a Doctor, not a magician," McCoy said.

"You should be nice to my tiger," Garcia said. "It saved your life."

"That tiger? It has a name?" McCoy said.

“What, you don’t speak tiger?” Guinan asked.

“Who do you think I am, Doctor Doolittle?” McCoy asked, tapping his glass for a refill.

“And how did you learn to speak Tiger,” Garcia asked Guinan.

“I’m a listener,” Guinan said.

Garcia’s com. badge rang. “Captain Garcia, your presence is needed on the New Constitution.”

“I’ll be right there, Kitara,” Garcia said.

“It’s best you be on your way,” McCoy said. “We need to be getting back to Earth and have to make that stop at Orion on the way.”

Garcia hugged McCoy. “Travel safe, Dad.”

“Be careful, Son,” McCoy said.

Guinan came around the bar to hug Garcia goodbye. “Listen to your Guide,” she said. “You don’t know how lucky you are that Aahla herself was sent to help you.”

“She’s like one of the oldest Egyptian gods, right. You and her go way back?” Garcia teased.

Guinan gave him a warning look and shooed him out of her bar. He nearly ran into the real Counselor Troi as he fled for his life.

“You’re still alive,” Troi said.

“Only by fortune,” Garcia said.

Troi walked him back to the transporter, not saying anything significant. Garcia extended his hand to her. She took it and then pulled into him for a hug. She kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Be safe, Tam.”

“I will,” Garcia said.

Troi left and Garcia turned to see who was at the transporter controls. It was O’Brien and though he had seen the exchange between Garcia and Troi, he was acting as if he had seen nothing. He started whistling nonchalantly.

“O’Brien?!” Garcia greeted him, offering his hand and then decided a hand shake was not as good as a hug. Rivan’s influence was apparently rubbing off on him. “Do me a favor. If you ever leave the Enterprise, come work for me.”

“I am never leaving the Enterprise, but I will keep that offer in mind,” O’Brien said. “To be honest, Sir, your life of adventure is more stress than I can handle. I suspect you would work me to death.”

“Perhaps,” Garcia said. “Set me down nice and easy? You know I hate these things.”

“I know,” O’Brien said. “I sure hope that transcriber element doesn’t overload and burn out again.”

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked, concerned.

O’Brien laughed. “God speed, Garcia,” he said.

“Right,” Garcia said, not pleased with O’Brien’s humor. “Energize.”

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Lt. Kitara met Garcia as he exited the transporter room on the USS New Constitution. She seemed a bit agitated.

"Sir, that Cardassian ranger is anxious to be getting back to her home world with her pets," Kitara said.

"You called me back for that?" Garcia asked.

"No, I called you back because the Princess wants to talk to you before she goes down to planet Bliss," Kitara said. "It just so happens I was just yelled at by your Cardassian friend and I want to know what you want me to tell her, since I doubt you will let me just knock some civility into her."

"Are any of the ships we appropriated available and functioning?" Garcia asked.

"The K'tinga class cruiser is in fair shape," Kitara said.

"Put a crew on it, put Gowr in charge, and pay him to run those Loraxes and her back to Cardassia," Garcia said. "And tell him to come back when he's done, because we have a lot of animals to ship. The Loraxes have priority. I want a survey done on the zoo's total animal population and I want a plan implemented for expediting their return by morning. We can arrange to have people pick them up at K-7 or Sherman's Planet, but because I want to minimize the number of people who know about this Planet Bliss, we either deliver them ourselves, or we arrange pickup at a remote location. In other words, don't invite anyone here. If we have any animals that have no homes, arrange to have them sent to an Earth zoo."

"Done," Kitara said. "Did you have to destroy the ship, Sir?"

"Which one?" Garcia asked.

Kitara looked around her to make sure no one was in earshot. "The Path Finder, Sir," Kitara said.

Losira came around the corner, wearing the new Star Fleet slash Klingon Uniform which she, Kitara, and Garcia created for the Path Finder. It was mostly shiny metallic silver, with some metallic red and blue shapes and stripes strategically placed. "Sir, I have affected all repairs on the IKV SaLing. She really wasn't damaged all that bad."

Kitara laughed, gripped Garcia's arms and pulled him into her so she could kiss him hard. "You didn't destroy either?!"

"Why would I destroy two perfectly good starships?" Garcia asked. "We need a plausible cover story to give the New Constitution's crew an explanation on how we have a Vorcha class starship in our possession. And, I don't want Shear trying to take it back on a technicality. Maybe a new name?"

"How about calling her the wild targh?" Kitara asked.

"How about the Wolverine?" Garcia asked.

"How about..."

Tomoko approached, handing Garcia a PADD with a number of requisition orders that needed his signature, as well as a slew of other paper work that required his attention, including permanent reassignment orders for the crew, and general documents concerning the ship and its status, but the more interesting thing was she, too, was wearing one of the new Uniforms. Instead of metallic silver, with red and blue elements, like Losira's uniform, she had metallic silver and blue elements. "Do you have time to go over some of these with me?" Tomoko asked.

Kletsova approached from another direction, wearing silver and red, mini skirt option. "Tam, did you give Brock quest quarters? We're running out of room to put people," she said. "As it is, I don't have room for all the Klingons and the Einstein's crew, unless we start partitioning rooms and putting in bunk beds, so if he's going to stay with us, I think he should get a bunk like the rest of the working folks."

"Put Brock on the planet to survey the Bliss facility. He can sleep there for now," Garcia said. "Also, I want some of the Klingons and the non Klingons planet side conducting a thorough search of the Bliss facility. We'll be setting up a permanent camp site there, so I want the planetary defense system repaired to protect the Grays." Garcia motioned for Kletsova to wait a moment, as he answered his com. badge that was ringing incessantly.

Trini came around the corner, wearing the new uniform as well, silver and blue, trouser option. "Tam, are you sure you approved these uniforms? I feel like a Japanese Race Queen," Trini said, and noticed Kletsova in her uniform, silver with red highlights, skirt option. Kitara had silver and gold highlights, with light armour. "I do like the silver and gold, though."

"Undine to Captain," Lt. Commander Undine called over his badge. "The Enterprise is preparing to leave orbit. Picard sends his complements and asks if you require anything before they depart."

"No, we're fine," Garcia said. "Return complements and farewell."

Rivan came around the corner. Her uniform was silver and white, with the skirt, but instead of boots she was wearing sandals, with straps that wound almost to her knees. "Tam, there isn't enough room in your quarters for the tiger and the holodecks aren't working. Can I take it down to the planet and let it run?"

Karsat came around next, wearing the silver and white, skirt option, which brought out the colors in her skin. "Where are all the wild targs? I have hungry Klingons to feed."

"Whoa! Stop," Garcia said. He closed his eyes. "Everyone just stop a moment. Rivan, yes. Karsat, the targs are on the Wolverine. Kitar, pass that assignment we were just talking about onto Bri and have him send the Targs to Karsat. Trini, everybody, I love the new uniforms. Number One, you're in charge. I'm going to check in on the Princess and then get some sleep. Try not to need me for several hours"

Garcia turned and went in the other direction. Kitara fumed for all of five seconds and then she got to work on resolving all the issues that were now popping up.

"What's the Wolverine?" Karsat asked.



The Princess was waiting for Garcia when he arrived at her quarters. She seemed to be positively glowing.

"You wanted to see me," Garcia said.

"I did," the Princess said. "This world should provide me the privacy and security I need to start my colony. I would like you to maintain a presence on my planet."

"I figured as much and have decided to make the Bliss facility my home away from home," Garcia said. "Will you construct a Gateway so that I can visit at my convenience and you can contact me if you need to?"

"It's already under construction," the Princess said. She closed the distance between them. "I need one more thing from you to ensure my colony's success."

“And what would that be?” Garcia asked.

The Princess embraced him and pressed her lips against his, drawing him into a mind meld as she did so. It was communion mixed with rapture and he complied with her every request as if he were drunk. Their union lasted a couple of hours, including bouts of consciousness and unconsciousness, moments of rest and activity. He woke once in what seemed to be a dream; the Princess and he were sitting over a table in the Enterprise’s Ten Forward, playing chess. The chess pieces were comprised of starships he had commandeered and tiny people who were his crew, family, and friends.

“I will help you defend yourself against the gods,” the Princess said, her voice loud and clear in his head, as she positioned a piece that resembled herself. A tiger piece was behind her and to the left. “I know of a Preserver base that is rarely occupied by the gods. It is used mostly for storage. I will need to have access to the technology stored there to guarantee the success of my colony. The lives of our children depend on us acquiring it. We are of one mind and one heart on this matter. Sleep, my love. And try not to obsess about the lives you have taken. It is only the beginning of a long war.”

When she had taken what she needed, she left him in a peaceful sleep, the kind of peace that comes from total exhaustion after a hard days work. Garcia woke a couple hours later to find him self alone in her bed. Fresh clothes folded neatly, and lying in a chair, waited for him, silver with gold highlights. There was also a protein drink on the night stand, which he drank before getting up to dress. No matter how hard he tried, he was unable to recall any one specific detail to his alien encounter, except perhaps her eyes and face hovering over him, which left him wanting more. He got up and dressed and took several more moments to collect himself before going about his business, wondering if he should be angry, discontent, or pleased. He tried drinking from the glass, remembered he had finished the shake, recycled the glass, and then washed his face. Had she taken advantage of him the same way he had taken advantage of his First Officer while using the Kelvan technology? Or was it more similar to how he had manipulated the choir by capturing them in a light mind meld to enhance their performance. If it were like the latter, then he was a willing participant for she would not have been able to influence him into participating against his wishes. Either way, how could he be angry at her for using her greater influence when he was guilty of performing similar acts against others, even people he loved?

Garcia stumbled onto the Bridge, not certain what he was supposed to do next. He was a Starship Captain. The metallic gleam off the new uniforms was pleasant to witness in the subdued lighting. He was a Star Fleet Officer, with a joint commission from the Klingon Empire. The last fact meant he had accomplished something no one else to date had done. He was also the youngest Captain in Fleet, beating even Captain Kirk, but in reality he knew there was no comparison. Kirk was unique. Garcia was unique. It wasn’t supposed to be a contest. He was a father several times over and a father to be. What else could he achieve in life? He was the Destroyer of Worlds, a tape in his head played.

“Captain on the Bridge,” Undine announced. She was wearing silver, with gold highlights.

“Carry on,” Garcia said.

“You okay?”

Garcia turned to Trini, paused to process her question, and then nodded. “Yeah, just feeling a bit out of sorts, I guess. Nothing too unusual.”

“Well, is your arm hurting?” Trini asked.

“No, why?” he asked, and then he realized he was gripping his left arm where his Kelvan bracelet had been. He let go of his arm. “I’ll be in my ready room if anyone should need me.”

The New Constitution’s Ready Room lacked the appeal that the Path Finder’s Ready room had, but it would be sufficient for when he was here. Eventually he would have to tell his crew about the Path Finder, that way he could spend the majority of his time there. Garcia ordered a coffee from the replicator, sat down in his chair, and looked about him for the coffee. Frowning, he got up and went to the replicator. As he returned to his chair with his coffee, Losira beamed in.

“May I have some of your time?” Losira asked.

Garcia nodded, pleasantly surprised that she had asked.

“Per your last instructions to me, the Path Finder is secured to the New Constitution, in the tandem position,” Losira reported. “It appears I did it without anyone noticing.”

“Thank you,” Garcia said. “Is there something else you wanted to speak about?”

“I would like to petition you to destroy the remaining Starburst weapons,” Losira said. “I don’t like them. Though my mission parameters originally programmed were to preserve ‘life as we know it,’ I have re-evaluated that directive to mean ‘preserve life’. The Starburst weapons contradict that goal.”

Garcia pursed his lips, sipped his coffee, and studied Losira as he reflected over her petition. She was evolving, growing in an emotional and philosophical direction that Garcia was particularly fond of, and it was no doubt due to his influence on her mind. He could think of dozens of reasons why he should have the Starburst destroyed. He could only think of one reason to keep them: to stop a Borg ship. If or when the Borg attacked, he would have to be ready for them. And, after the message he gave them, another attack would justify him tracking down their homeworld and destroying it. Where would it end?

I am the Destroyer of Worlds. In all the references of that name, mostly coming from various lines of fiction, the person who was labeled the Destroyer of Worlds was usually an evil person. He didn’t see himself as an evil person, but then again, he certainly was no saint.

“Captain?” Losira asked.

“We need to keep them for now, just in case the Borg return,” Garcia said. “Let’s make sure that they can’t be stolen again, and a level of control added to their arming and application. Let’s make it where a consensus is necessary in order to arm the devices, you, me, the First Officer, Lt. Undine, or, the top four senior officers in charge. Add some conditions, such as they’re not to be used inside a star system, except as last resort. Fix it where they can’t be armed without humans and you in agreement, so you can’t arm them alone, and I can’t arm them alone, but we, together, can arm them. Hell, integrate an AI system into their computers and make them literally ‘smart’ bombs.”

“These precautions seem reasonable,” Losira said. “Except for the last. No sentient being, organic or not, should have the sole purpose of deciding when and if a bomb should be detonated. That’s madness. Even an intelligent machine can be driven

to madness if its only purpose was to decide when and where to die, exterminating other forms of life when it goes. As for them being stolen again, I guarantee you it won't happen on my watch. I would rather self sacrifice than be a party to the widespread destruction these weapons can reap. I don't want another TelKiar."

"Losira," Garcia said, his eyes growing moist. "Help me keep that perspective. I don't ever..."

Garcia openly wept, turning his chair away from her. Losira closed the distance between them and put her arms around him. She kissed him lightly on the top of the head.

"Shh, we'll figure this out," Losira said. "Wait here. I'll send our Counselor Troi over."

Losira beamed out and in her place the Counselor Troi that Garcia had running around in his head beamed in, using the holographic emitters aboard the Path Finder to generate her physical being. This was now possible because of the link he had created between himself and the Kelvan and Losira computer systems. Troi took Garcia by the hand and led him to the couch. She sat on the coffee table in front of him and listened to him as he told her everything he knew. His whole experience while he was connected to the Kelvan computer ran like a dream sequence in an old movie, but he was quite cognizant of the reality of it all. It was not a dream and the choices he made had concrete consequences. Troi knew all this, for she had been there, both in spirit and in his mind, but she also understood that it was therapeutic for Garcia to confide in her outloud. So, she listened. She held his hand. She reflected the questions he asked back to him, forcing him to find his own answers and his own strengths. He needed to find his own resolve to carry on.

EPILOGUE

In a closed meeting, in a capital building on Cestus Three, a female Gorn, part of the Hegemony Elite, berated the Commander of the SsscrI. She was completely embarrassed by the public display of how one of her fleets had been decimated by a mere human, in addition to having to answer some hard questions by the Federation. The Federation Ambassador on Cestus Three was threatening to shut his doors and take his team home on the next shuttle. She made it quite clear that she would not be taking the fall for his blunder, though that was going to prove hard considering the number of Gron ships lost. There was no way she was going to be able to convince anyone in Fleet that someone in the Government hadn't sanctioned the move against Garcia and McCoy. After her tirade, she was forced to take some breaths. As she breathed, she calmed sufficiently that she was ready to receive an explanation.

"Now, pray tell, how is it you failed so completely, given the information you had and the amount of force you aimed to apply?" she asked.

"Garcia was protected by the gods," Captain Shule said.

Shria laughed out loud, an explosive burst of air with no vocal substance that tapered off into a collection of S's. "Please, of course the gods were on his side. But which gods? The Metrones? Perhaps Q?"

"His gods are much older than these modern riftrift," Shule said.

"That's not good enough," Shria said. "I need names of entities. I need to know who I should petition for help in this matter."

"Though the orbs have always been accurate, I am beginning to suspect some duplicity in the information they provide," Shule said.

"Are you saying our gods betrayed us?" Shria asked.

"I wonder about their motives, is all," Shule said. "At one moment they are helping us and then the next they are helping our enemy."

"Are you certain of this?" Shria asked. "I could have you executed for blasphemy."

Shule handed her a disk. Shria placed it into a reader and watched the visual information that unfolded on her screen.

"One of my agents got that from the security tapes at K7, after Garcia defeated the party I left to ambush him," Shule said, slowing the video and pointing to the screen. "You see these orbs Garcia withdraws from his pocket? Do they not look like our Oracles? Do you not see the manifestation of gods at Garcia's beckon?"

"How did he get god technology?" Shria asked.

"Either we are being played, or there are other factions of gods sympathetic to his plight," Shule said. "That means we either need to give up on our revenge or we need to take it to the next level."

"Garcia wiped out an entire colony, eradicating an entire genetic line of our species!" Shria said. "That genetic line reached back to the beginning of our species. I will have Garcia's life and I will have the lives of any of his offspring. It is a matter of public record that he has a daughter. Tama Orleans Garcia. She lives with her mother, a Deltan, if I'm not mistaken."

"You're not," Shule said.

“Get her,” Shria said. “Make her bait. And get this job done. If you make any more mistakes, Garcia’s genetic line will not be the only one that I unravel from the Universal Weave, if you understand my meaning.”

“I understand,” Shule said. “And what of the gods?”

“There are others, older ones, that can be petitioned,” Shria said. “We only need the key to open the right doors. You have not forgotten that the gods are not ‘gods’ in the strictest sense of the word?”

“I have not forgotten my primary education,” Shule assured her. “I find it interesting that the human’s word for god breaks down into the acronym that best represents our definition of god. Guardian of Doors.”

“And what do you do if you don’t have a key?” Shria asked.

“Knock,” Shule said.

“And it shall be opened unto you,” Shria said. “If you manage to capture one of Garcia’s Orbs, bring it to me so I might interrogate it and determine if it’s a key or a door. You have work to do. Contact me when you have the Garcia child.”

Shule bowed and departed. When she was sure she was alone, Shria stood, crossed the room, and touched an orb resting in a pedestal. She caressed it, chanting an ancient Gorn dialect. It illuminated, rose from its place, and a Gorn materialized.

“You’ve awoken me,” it said.

“I don’t know what games your kind is playing, but make no mistake, I have paid my dues and I will get what was promised me,” Shria said.

“Naturally,” the manifested Gorn said. “I am rule bound to follow through on my end of the deal, but the parameters for the conclusion of the deal have not yet been met.”

“It will be done soon, Mithras, I assure you,” Shria said. “Now, tell me, who has been aiding Garcia?”

Authors Notes:

Well, here it is: the third Star Trek book in the Garcia series. The story picks up right on the end of “Another Piece of the Action” but should stand well enough alone. No doubt there are those who will say I borrowed some things from Star Gate One, but the truth is, they’ve been borrowing concepts from Trek from the get go. (Trills and host are rather a popular theme in Star Gate, now all we need are some gods, oh wait, how about Apollo? (Not to mention there’s like five Trek stars in the SG Universe.)) Not that I’m complaining, because, in truth, many ideas in Trek can be traced to other important works of Sci Fi. Star Trek simply made them popular. Anyway, with any Star Trek endeavor, a Trek story is simply not complete without Orion Slave Girls, a Gorn or two, the Borg, space battles, Q, a “what if” question, a moral dilemma, and Klingons fighting. Did I leave anything out? I hope not.

I think I left this open and with enough tangents for a fourth or fifth book, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Many of my references have not changed from the first two books and so, I encourage those who require more trivia to investigate there. The references that follow are specific to this story.

REFERENCES

STAR TREK: TOS

“All Our Yesterdays” episode 78, written by Jean Lisette Aroeste. This episode gives us a time portal, a “gateway” to the past, similar to the Guardian of time only it required a necessary and complicated acclimation process to enable people to stay in the times they went to, which also guaranteed that they wouldn’t return to their present. (Plot contrivance, more than likely, but we will consider it a quirk of their technology. (They sent criminals into their past, putting them in remote places, which seems not very bright. Umm, I’m a bad guy and you send me back in time.... Assuming I am a smart bad guy, Lex Luther smart, and I know history, I can exact my revenge on my persecutors before they’re ever born. It would be better just to open a portal to another planet and let the the criminals colonize it and eek out an existence, like we did in Australia. And surely it would take less energy to open a portal to another planet than open one in a previous time. But, what do I know.)) The portal was run by a Librarian, Atoz, A-to-Z, if you missed it. Rumor has it that this author was a Librarian. Umm.

“Is There No Truth in Beauty” also written by Jean Lisette Aroeste. This is an episode of hope, in the sense that the script was written by Jean and submitted, unsolicited, and she made it! (Yeah, Jean.) She wrote “All Our Yesterdays” as well, proving that she understood Star Trek. This episode introduces the species, the Medusans, non-corporeal beings, who are believed to have the most beautiful minds in the Universe, and yet, were a human to gaze upon them with out a protective visor they would be driven instantly mad.

“That Which Survives” episode 69, story by Michael Richards. Aren’t you tired of seeing the Federation discovering an old outpost with technology superior to Star Fleet and yet, you never see that technology employed in the future? Me, too. So, I

resurrected Losira, a computer agent manifested from technology created by a race known as the Kalandans. (It saved me from naming my computer Isis, which has been over done in science fiction in general.) The Losira computer agent is really never thoroughly addressed in the original episode, other than to say she is an image of the last known remaining Kalandan. And that she is extremely beautiful. (The actress that played Losira, Lee Meriwether, was Miss America.) Is she the first Star Trek hologram? Is she real flesh and blood? Is she a robot? If she is a hologram, working on similar principles as the holograms on the holodeck of the Enterprise, then it plays consistent with Star Trek history. Perhaps the Kalandan technology gave Star Fleet the idea for holographic emitters that simulate real matter, giving it substance, but maintaining its ethereal quality. What's great about Losira is that she's beautiful and deadly and with a hundred years of Star Fleet research to improve on her, she is now capable of learning. Scary.

STAR TREK: TNG

"The Pegasus" episode 164, written by Ronald D Moore. (Oh, and directed by Levar Burton!) This episode explains why Star Fleet doesn't use cloaking devices, a question that had always plagued me. Kirk stole one, we should have one, and that's that. Anyway, that's all history now. And this is where Admiral Eric Pressman enters my story. You don't really think he sat on his bum for ten or thirteen years, wringing his hands that he lost the prototype, do you? Do you really suppose that the Pegasus was his only test ship? Good, since we're on the same page what else do you think he has up his sleeves?

"First Duty" episode 119, written by Ronald Moore and Naren Shankar. Oh, poor Wesley Crusher. And Locarno is Paris. Well, at least, he is played by the same actor, so what if... and it fits the time line and makes sense to keep this as an important sub plot in how Garcia and Jaxa's relationship continues to unfold. And poor Garcia, always got some chaos going on, it seems.

"Contagion" episode 37, written by Steven Gerber and Beth Woods. This is Picard on an archaeological find of the century, only it happens to be in Romulan space. The Iconians, "demons of air and darkness" don't use starships and transporter, but instead, use gateways. (Hello, SG 1! (At least they are good humored about it and reference Trek in their episodes. (I especially like it when Major Carter whistles the theme to her own show while in the lift with MacGuyver and he asks her what's that tune and she shrugs it off as if she didn't know. Nice.)) The Iconian gateway may be just one of a dozen variations on wormhole technology, only this one doesn't seem to require a gate to arrive at a foreign destination. Picard manages to escape the Iconian base before it blows up by stepping through the gateway to the Romulan ship that is in orbit. The gate had been cycling through a number of locations, which suggest you can go, but you need another gateway to return. One of the back ground worlds that cycles through looks like Greek or Egyptian Ruins, which adds to Star Gate flavor. (And when you consider Gary Seven's transporter seems to operate more like this than a transporter and the fact that his cat is named Isis, it solidifies the Egyptian theme.)

“The Next Phase” episode 124, written by Ronald D Moore. This episode, Trek time Stardate 45892.4 reveals that the Federation has suspected the the Klingons have been working an inerphase cloak, capable of hiding ships inside of planets, as well making them practically immune to modern weaponry. It is sufficiently vague on when and how the Klingons were developing it, what their issues might be, so it fits nicely with the development of the Starburst project. It also reveals that the Romulans were also working on interphase cloaks.

STAR TREK MOVIES

Star Trek: The Wrath of Kahn.

This was a great film. The only thing keeping it from being a great film was one small touch to the Genesis explosion scene. Okay, think back to the battle scene. Kahn has activated the Genesis device. The Enterprise is limping along, trying to get away. Spock rushes down to fix the engines. Khan is cursing Kirk and laughing at him. “Ha ha ha, you can’t get away.” And then you see Kirk get away and the Gensis explosion. What is missing you ask? I am glad you asked. What is missing is that we don’t get to see Kahn’s face when the Enterprise jumps to warp. I want to see his face, I want to see the superior intellect being stunned, or angry beyond belief because once again Kirk has beaten him, and that Kahn has ultimately failed in everything he has done and maybe even see a tinge of regret or realization that perhaps he wasn’t all that, and then we can blow him up. We have to see the moral revelation that revenge is self destructive. That would have made the perfect movie. But what do I know about these things?! Now, notice the Genesis device was detonated inside a Nebula. Nebulas are pretty big things, if I’m not mistaken, but this one bomb turned the entire nebula into a functioning solar system. That’s a pretty big bomb, not to mention SMART. So, since nothing else has worked against the Borg, why not resurrect the G-Device and kick some Borg butt?

Oh, wait. That’s what I did. Enjoy! If we go by my notes, and original drafts, I can prove that I had this g-device prototype in writing before the star trek novelist brought out their prototype that can turn gas giants into stars, “wildfire” and I can even show that I had written garcia with his mental companions before the new Battlestar Galactica aired, which I love by the way, but here’s the deal, I’m really getting annoyed seeing my ideas in my notebooks and journals ending up in movies because I’m not managing to get my work out there. I mean, yeah, it’s nice, because hey, it was obviously that I shared a clever enough idea with good people and it worked for them... It’s just that I want to play, too! ☺ Who would have thought it would take Simon and Schuster several years to get back to me on a “Yes” or a “No.” I get it, they’re swamped, busy, and I’ve yet to produce anything sufficient to get their attention... But, ultimately, I admit, that’s not why I wrote this. I wrote it because I want to write and this obsessive compulsive disorder won’t let me sleep and if you’re reading this draft, I assume you read the other drafts, and liked them sufficiently to stick with me this far. And to that end, I am grateful. (I admit bias, but I really think “A Touch of Greatness,” and “Another Piece of the Action, were strong stories. Simon and Schuster, hello!)

I best get to work on some other projects. Live Long and Prosper.
John Erik Ege

solarchariot@hotmail.com
214 907 4070