

STAR TREK:
The Seventh House

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EPH

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

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



PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"N'elent?" Glor asked, bemused.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Number One?" Garcia asked.

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

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

"We're Klingons," Kitara reminded him, unconsciously patting her side arm.

"We're always packing. Alpha team, prepare to move out."

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

"Still no life signs," Kletsova said.

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

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

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

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

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

“Threes,” Garcia repeated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you sure?” Losira asked.

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

“Helm, take us to warp,” Garcia said.

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You know they did,” Jurak said.

“But they’re singing?” Trini said.

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

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

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

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

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

♪♪▶

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

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

“That was unfair,” Kitara snapped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What?” Garcia asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They’re fictitious,” Garcia said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s not fair,” Kitara said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Someone is protecting you," Kitara said.

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

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

"The gods, perhaps," Gowr asked.

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

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

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

Garcia qualified.

"Yes," Kitara said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Fine,” Kitara said.

“Fine,” Garcia said, parroting her sarcasm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hell no,” Gowr said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Garcia, Gowr, and Glor sat back down.

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

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

"Will you answer something for me?"

"Ask," Glor said.

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

"What does this mean?" Garcia asked.

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

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

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

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

"Are you sure?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Need to know?” Glor asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said.

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

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

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

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

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

“A star over a field,” Garcia said.

“A light,” Gowr and Glor said.

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

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

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

“How badly?”

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I want you to come home,” Krag said.

“I’m rather busy,” Kitara said.

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

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

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

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

“Are you pregnant?” A’ral asked.

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

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

“I am pregnant,” Kitara admitted.

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

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

“And this doesn’t?!” A’ral demanded.

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

“You wouldn’t?!” Kitara said.

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

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

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

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

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

“Father disowned me,” Kitara said.

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

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

Trolol laughed.

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

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

"How?" Kitara demanded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So, how do we fix this?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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