

THE CALLING, Part 1

A Star Trek: Enterprise Saga

By Richard Paolinelli

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PROLOGUE

*THE MEDITERRANEAN, EARTH, 2048 A.D. –
A TIME BEFORE STARDATES...*

The whole planet has gone mad.

Genoa Forelni, less than a year removed from his wedding day, stood atop the highest hill on Salina Island and pronounced his homeworld's epitaph. The gentle waves of the Mediterranean Sea lapped the beach below in stark contrast to the glow of several raging fires across the sea in Sicily that reflected upon the water. He stood rock still, listening to the soft rumble of explosions that marked the position of the battlefronts. They were drawing nearer with each passing hour. By midnight, he was certain, Sicily would fall and Salina Island would follow suit by sunrise.

"Damn them," he muttered, finally breaking his silence. "Colonel Green, Khan Noonien Singh and all of the enemies of humanity. So-called 'supermen'. Nothing more than rabid, power-hungry dogs. Damn them all to hell!"

The world he had been born into a quarter-century before had been one finally at peace. It had seemed peace would become a permanent fixture, that all the old troubles and hatreds had finally been laid to rest forever. Then Green and those like him had marched the planet inexorably toward World War III. And now the world burned and he was only hours away from leaving and never seeing his birth world again.

“Genoa, they are waiting for you on the pad.”

He turned away from the carnage across the waters and held out his hand to his bride. He’d known Prima Silvestri nearly his entire life. They’d grown up in the same village, attended the same university. When he worked up the courage to propose marriage her response had been far from traditional.

“Well, it’s about time,” her eyes shone above her impish smile as she replied before adding “Yes, of course, I will marry you.”

Her eyes still shone, and there was always a trace of that impish smile, whenever he looked at her now. Even though there was little reason for either to be there given the events of the past few months.

“The loading is complete?” he inquired as he took her hand.

“As are all of the pre-checks. All that remains is for the ship’s commander and his wife to board so we can launch.”

“Then let us not delay the moment any longer,” he replied, starting back down the hill. But Prima held her ground, looking back toward Sicily.

“If we had tried to build the ship on your family’s lands...” she began.

“Then we would all be dead, or being held prisoner,” Genoa finished bitterly. “The ship would be in the hands of lunatics. And we would be dead as soon as they had extracted every bit of useful information from us regarding it. We were fortunate no one knew of your father’s estate here and more so that we haven’t yet been discovered. Come.”

“I wish there was another way,” she remarked as she followed him down the path. “We will never see Earth again. Our children never will at all.”

“I wish it could be otherwise. But only death waits for us if we stay. Even if they don’t burn the world to a cinder, I will not have my children grow up in what will follow. No. We will find a new world and make it a better place to live, for their sake if for no other.”

They reached a circular black pad at the end of the path and stepped onto it. Genoa tapped a control on his belt and the pad receded into the ground. As they

dropped below the surface another disc slipped into place above, leaving them in complete darkness for a few seconds until the lift lowered into a great, well-lit, cavern below.

Filling the vast opening was a ship, constructed in secret these last six months. The *Cominciare* would carry over two hundred young men and women, like Genoa and Prima. Couples who wanted to start new lives, new families, on a world not destined for Armageddon. Genoa's father, Giancarlo, had been a brilliant engineer with a revolutionary idea for a new way to propel humanity to the stars.

But the Colonel Greens of the world only wanted him to build more powerful weapons, with faster ways to deliver them to their targets. When Giancarlo Forelni refused, his wife and daughter were killed. Finally, when he still refused, Green himself murdered Genoa's father.

Genoa had only barely escaped that fate. His father's warning coming only minutes before Green's men had come for him. He'd been in hiding for over a year, working on his father's revolutionary Worm Drive in secret while recruiting other like-minded people to build the ship and to colonize another world.

On the outside, the ship looked like a massive version of the old Saturn V's that had propelled

humanity to the Moon eighty years before. The three massive engines were needed to lift the ship into orbit. Only free of the Earth's atmosphere and gravitational pull would the ship reveal its true configuration.

The outer tube and engines would fall away, revealing a long white fuselage, ten decks high and three hundred yards in length. Two nacelles would extend from the fuselage, the Worm Drive engines, and send the ship onward to her destination at incredible speeds. Their destination was Gamma Canaris. At normal speed, the journey would take hundreds of years.

But the Worm Drive did not travel at normal speed. There was nothing "normal" about it. It simply targeted its destination coordinates, opened up a wormhole, and took off. Anyone traveling within its sphere of influence would only think a few days had passed and then when the ship emerged at the other end would find themselves at the destination.

By Genoa's calculations, they would be traveling for a week and then be so far from Earth it would literally be centuries before they saw another human being from Earth again. And that suited him just fine.

"Commander Forelni!"

"Hello, Zephram, are we ready to find out which one of us is right?"

“We are ready,” sixteen-year-old Zephram Cochrane replied with a blush. “But I think we’re both right, sir. I’m just more right.”

“Perhaps you are at that,” Genoa allowed with a laugh. “Perhaps one day your warp theory will drive great ships out into the void. But it is still a theory and my father’s Worm Drive is real and ready to go. Are you sure you won’t change your mind and come with us? You could work on your warp drive out there as well as you can down here.”

The young man considered it for a moment then shook his head.

“No thanks, I think I’ll stay. Besides, once I get my warp drive up and running, I bet I’ll get to Gamma Canaris before you.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” Genoa allowed. “Well, you’d better get over there and get aboard the flitter before they leave without you. Once we take off the authorities are going to swarm this place and I’d hate to think of you rotting in a prison cell instead of working on your warp drive.”

“That doesn’t sound like a lot of fun to me,” Cochrane admitted, cracking a quick smile. “Good luck, Commander, Mrs. Forelni.”

Cochrane sprinted across the gangway and joined the line of technicians waiting to board the last large

flitter to evacuate the cavern before launch. With a final wave, the young scientist disappeared into the hatch which slid closed behind him. Genoa watched as the flitter lifted and slipped into the underground tube that led under the sea outside.

“We’ll give them ten minutes to get clear and get lost in the civilian traffic in France before we launch,” he turned toward his own ship’s open hatch. “We’d better get up to the bridge. It wouldn’t do for the ship to leave without her commander and communications officer.”

Prima stepped through first and Genoa closed and secured the hatch after following her inside. In her current orientation, it required some climbing to get to the *Cominciare*’s bridge. Once in space, it would be easier to move about but gravity demanded its due on the surface.

“Well, howdy folks,” the ship’s pilot greeted them as they entered the bridge. “I was figurin’ I was about to take off without y’all.”

“Wouldn’t dream of missing this flight, Cooper,” Genoa slid into the command chair beside his pilot. Cooper Filidei’s family had emigrated from Italy to Texas toward the end of the 19th Century. He’d been visiting family when Genoa had first encountered him. Cooper’s skill as a pilot was equaled by his skill as

both a smuggler and a procurer of much-needed material. Without him, Genoa readily admitted to any who asked, this ship would never have been built. Still, it was strange hearing his Texas twang among a ship full of native Italian accents.

“The last flitter has cleared the launch safety zone,” Prima reported from her station. “The ship’s cargo master reports cargo loaded and secured, passengers are strapped into their launch couches and are ready to go.”

“Thank you,” Genoa said, scanning his flight board. “What was the final count down there?”

“We’re carrying two hundred and thirty-two passengers and crew,” Cooper answered. “Plenty of food, water and seeds for two years and dozens of various critters. We’re a certified Ge-Noah’s Ark.”

The flight engineer groaned. Prima merely shook her head. Genoa favored his pilot with a withering look.

“You’ve been saving that one just for this moment, haven’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” Cooper grinned broadly.

“Remind me why I don’t leave you behind.”

“ ‘Cause you’d never get this whale past the Moon without me?”

“Hmm, I suppose we’ll have to go with that. Bring the main engines online.”

“Mains coming up, standing by for ignition,” the engineer called out.

“Forward shield in place,” Genoa called out as he toggled switches on his board. “Cracking the overhead dome.”

The top of the hill above the rocket split apart as the two heavy doors lifted up and away. Dirt, rocks, foliage and other debris slid down the hill. A small amount fell into the opening, striking the conical shield that deflected it well away from the ship underneath.

“Doors open,” Cooper called out. “We’re clear.”

“Retracting the forward shield,” Genoa watched his board intently until a specific light switched from red to green. “The shield is clear. Get us out of here, Cooper, before someone notices a hill just disappeared.”

“Roger that,” Cooper stabbed his finger down on the launch button. “Here we go!”

The three large engines rumbled to life and quickly tooled upward toward full thrust. The rocket did not start moving, held into place by massive steel locks.

“Engines at one hundred percent thrust,” the engineer shouted over the roar.

“Releasing the locks,” Cooper called out.

As the locks let go their hold on the rocket several high tension coils, suddenly free as well, helped hurl the rocket skyward. The combined power of the engines and the boost from the coils was needed to get the rocket out of the atmosphere before any Earth forces could respond and shoot it down.

Genoa felt gravity fighting to keep his ship from escaping its grasp. His body sank into his chair and a ring of black started to appear around his field of vision. Two minutes seemed to last two weeks and then the engines cut off.

“Wow, that was quick,” Cooper said.

“Not quick enough,” Genoa replied. “Status?”

“We’re in orbit, right where we should be. Engines and outer shell detaching right about...now!”

They felt the lurch that indicated a successful separation. Genoa toggled a series of switches that extended the nacelles. A pair of bumps accompanied a set of lights switching from red to green.

“Nacelles locked in place and at full power. Any sign of trouble out there?”

“I doubt anyone on the ground had time to realize what we were up to,” Cooper scanned his board. “No activity from Orbital Command and we’re too far from

the platforms for them to be a threat. We've got a clean shot."

"Then let's not waste it," Genoa quickly tapped a set of commands. "Coordinates set. Is the ship ready?"

"All green here," the engineer reported.

"Same here, Cap'n," Cooper added. "Let's get going."

"Agreed," Genoa replied, gripping the Worm Drive's thrust control. "It's time to go to our new home."

He pushed the throttle to full. The *Cominciare* gained speed as a vortex of energy appeared just in front of her bow. The swirling bolts of blue-green seemed to crack open space itself, forming a tunnel. A wormhole! Just as Giancarlo had predicted.

And then, carrying the hopes and dreams of over two hundred refugees looking to colonize a new world and make a better one than the one they were leaving behind, the *Cominciare* leapt into the beckoning wormhole and disappeared.

CHAPTER ONE

Aboard the Enterprise (NX-01) Near the Federation-Klingon border, 2156 A.D.

“Entering unaffiliated space, Commander,” Ensign Travis Mayweather reported.

“Very well, Ensign,” Commander T’Pol replied. “Go to yellow alert. Ensign Sato, call the Captain to the bridge.”

“Don’t bother,” Captain Jonathan Archer said as he stepped onto the bridge. T’Pol gracefully slipped out of the command chair with a nod to Archer as she reclaimed her post at the science station. “Let’s find out why the Vulcan High Command suggested we shouldn’t bother exploring this area of space, shall we?”

“It is curious that the Klingons never attempted to claim this region,” T’Pol remarked as she began running scans. “Vulcan would have little need to claim it, but the Klingons rarely pass up an opportunity to expand their empire’s holdings.”

“Maybe the Klingon equivalent of the boogeyman lives somewhere out there,” quipped Lieutenant Malcom Reed from his tactical station.

“Well,” Archer interjected. “If there’s something out here that scares Klingons I’m not so sure we should be in any hurry to meet it. Let’s proceed at Warp factor 2 and run continuous scans at maximum range.”

The *Enterprise* left behind charted space and gracefully slipped into the unknown. The crew as a whole was eager to explore space, hopefully in peace, given its recent experiences in the Expanse. An hour after leaving charted space behind they still hadn’t encountered so much as a speck of dust. As was often the case in space exploration, that changed in a hurry.

“Captain,” T’Pol called out. “Sensors are detecting four objects ahead. Three appear to be nickel-iron based asteroids of some size. The fourth is... a ship. Klingon. *Korlaz*-class.”

“Polarize the hull,” Archer commanded. “Travis, bring us within ten kilometers of the Klingon vessel. Hoshi, see if you can raise her.”

“I’m not detecting any activity from the ship,” T’Pol reported. “It may be a derelict.”

“We’ll proceed with an abundance of caution until we know for certain,” Archer replied. “Hoshi, any response?”

“Nothing, Captain,” Ensign Soto replied from Communications. “They’re not sending out anything at all.”

“Malcolm?”

“I’m not detecting any weapons lock or even any attempt to charge weapons. *Korlaz*-class ships aren’t heavily armed but if they were warming up what they do have, we should be able to detect it by now.”

Archer studied the forward screen. The Klingon ship and the asteroids were still too far away to show up.

“Let’s close on in and keep scanning for anything out of the ordinary.”

Enterprise dropped out of warp several minutes later and took up station-keeping just outside the known weapons range of a *Korlaz*-class ship. The ship, about two-thirds the size of the *Enterprise*, was in a slow tumble holding within a kilometer of the nearest asteroid. None of its running lights shone. It was a derelict.

“T’Pol?”

“Sensors show no activity at all, Captain. No signs of life at all. It appears not only is the ship without power it is also without life support.”

“What is a crew capacity for a *Korlaz*-class ship?”

“Standard crew is fifty-six. There signs of recent battle damage, but no debris nearby to indicate this was the scene of any kind of incident.”

“Boarding party, Sir?” Reed asked.

“I’m not sure,” Archer replied, studying the disabled ship. “Something about this seems wrong. Commander, let’s take a closer look at those asteroids. I want a full scan of each one. Travis, bring us around the Klingon ship where we have a clear view of those asteroids but let’s keep our distance from all four. Malcolm, keep a close eye on that ship, just in case we’re dealing with the Klingon version of possum.”

The *Enterprise* swung about, keeping her bow toward the asteroids. On the surface the tumbling objects looked like ordinary asteroids.

“Is it just me,” Archer said as he watched the three spheroids. “Or are they all tumbling at the same rate and direction as our Klingon ship?”

“It is not just you,” T’Pol replied. “And all three asteroids have the exact same composition of nickel,

iron and other minerals. They are also precisely the same mass and size.”

“And what are the odds of three perfect duplicate asteroids randomly tumbling about in open space together like this?”

“I would say as close to absolutely impossible as one can get.”

“Yellow alert, arm torpedoes and the phase cannons.”

“Cannons and torpedoes ready,” Reed called out. “Still no sign of activity from the Klingon ship.”

“Travis, back us away until we figure out what’s really going on here.”

Before the Ensign could input the commands, the three asteroids suddenly broke apart like eggshells revealing what had been hidden inside – three Klingon Birds-of-Prey.

“There are times when I really hate being right,” Archer muttered.

“With all due respect, Sir,” Reed chimed in. “I second that. Their weapons systems are live.”

“All stop, Travis. Hail them, Hoshi, let’s see if we can talk our way out of this trap.”

“We’re being hailed by a Commander Kaln of the *Qo’vat*.”

“On screen.”

“Attention Earth vessel,” the Klingon commander announced without preamble. “You are outgunned. You will surrender your vessel or we will blow you out of space.”

“So much for the pleasantries,” Archer returned. “Commander, might I point out that we are not in Klingon space nor have we undertaken any action that would justify an act of war on your part.”

“Neither of which concerns me in the least, Earther,” Kaln shot back. “You will surrender your vessel now or you will die under the guns of my fleet.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Commander Kaln,” Archer began in a measured tone. “May I remind you that such an action on your part would be considered an act of war, one your High Command might not be so eager to initiate. Not to mention the fact that you will lose at least one ship and many lives in an exchange of fire with my ship.”

“It is a good day to die, Earther,” Kaln displayed a fanged smile. “As for the High Command, they will believe it was your ship’s attack on our science vessel that was the act of war.”

“You know we had nothing to do with that.”

“A pity you won’t be around to tell anyone your side of the story, isn’t it?” Kaln turned slightly to give the order to attack. Archer followed suit but before either could issue any orders Reed suddenly shouted out.

“Captain! Multiple ships dropping out of warp. Six, seven, ten...twelve ships of unknown configuration! They have us and the Klingons englobed. I’m getting energy readings consistent with weapons being armed on all ships.”

Archer looked back to the main screen and found the Klingon Commander had lost all of his bluster. If anything, he looked something most un-Klingon. He looked very afraid.

“Captain,” Hoshi called out. “We are being hailed by the lead ship. In Standard.”

“Put them on,” Archer failed to keep the surprise off his face and from his tone.

The screen switched to the bridge of one of the unknown ships, revealing a very human-looking man of nearly thirty years of age sitting at ease in a central command chair. A gold collar above a wine tunic, with no clear indication of rank anywhere to be found, and black trousers and boots served as the Etalyian uniform. He was a handsome man, with dark hair and piercing blue-steel eyes. He carried an aura of absolute authority that belied a man of his younger age.

“Greetings, *Enterprise*,” he said in a casual tone that seemed somewhat out of place under the circumstances. “I am Capitano Bari Forelni of the Etalyian cruiser, *Sicilia*. I welcome you to Etalyian space.”

“I’m Captain Jonathan Archer. I thank you for your welcome but it seems not everyone is happy to see us here...”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Forelni cracked a bemused smile. “Our good friend Kaln. One moment, Captain.”

The transmission from the Etalyian ship switched to a split-screen of Forelni and Kaln.

“Commander, you are quite some distance beyond the Klingon border. I would be somewhat willing to chalk it up to yet another error of incompetent Klingon navigation,” Kaln face twisted in rage, but the Klingon held his tongue. “Provided of course your three ships turn around and head back to Klingon space immediately.”

“We will collect our science vessel...”

“You will do no such thing,” Forelni interrupted, his tone no longer casual or friendly. “You towed that derelict into our space three days ago to set a trap for the next ship to wander by. We’ve been waiting to see what you would do when that happened. So that you will not be tempted to try this little trick again...”

Forelni snapped his fingers. The image of Kaln was replaced with an exterior view of one of the Etalyian ships turning about and opening fire on the deserted Klingon ship until nothing remained but dust. Once done, the ship turned back and joined ten of the other ships in closing ranks on the three Klingon vessels, leaving the *Sicilia* and the *Enterprise* outside the firing zone.

“Now then,” Forelni returned to that same maddeningly calm tone. “There is nothing keeping you in our space, Kaln. The High Command has been informed of this incident. As you are a privateer and not official Klingon Navy, nothing further will come of it. But if I were you, Kaln, I would set a course for the Outmarches along the Romulan border and find some *Kuve* to defeat in battle before I showed my face near Qo’Nos ever again.”

The Klingon looked as if he would explode. Suddenly, he spat out something in Klingonese and his half of the screen went dark, replaced by the view of the three outnumbered ships. The Klingon fleet turned and headed back toward Klingon space with nine Etlayan vessels following close behind.

“He didn’t even say goodbye,” Forelni quipped. “How rude.”

“I suspect he is saying plenty about both of us right now,” Archer remarked. “Thank you, Captain, your arrival seems to have prevented a fight.”

“We simply cannot have visitors attacked by interstellar highwaymen, Captain,” Forelni replied. “Our Minister of Tourism and Trade simply won’t stand for it. I assume you are from Earth? We’ve been wondering if you’d ever get out this way.”

“Yes, we are from Earth,” Archer acknowledged. “But, how exactly would you know that? We were told this was an area of space that no one had explored yet.”

Archer turned to look over at T’Pol as it had been the Vulcans who had made the claim originally. Forelni followed Archer’s glance and caught sight of the First Officer at the edge of the visual pickup.

“A Vulcanian! It has been a long time since we’ve had contact with one. Live long and prosper, T...” Forelni offered a well-executed Vulcan greeting with his right hand but paused as he did not yet know the name of who he was addressing.

“T’Pol, Captaino,” she informed him as she returned the gesture. “Peace and long life.”

“I am surprised, Captain. You have a Vulcanian on board and yet you say you thought this space was....,” Forelni stopped as understanding dawned. “Ah, I see. My apologies, Captain. It seems when S’urnaq visited our world some decades back, he took our desire not to leave our world somewhat literally. He must have decided not to report our presence here at all.”

“That does seem to be the most logical explanation, Captains,” T’Pol affirmed.

“As for how we know of Earth, Captain,” Forelni continued. “That is a very long and complicated story.

May I invite you and your ship to accompany us to Etalya? Your crew would be welcome to take shore leave.”

“Meeting new people is why we’re out here, Capitano,” Archer agreed.

“I see you have warp drive,” Forelni remarked. “What is your top speed?”

“We can do Warp 5 if needed.”

“Etalya is only ten hours away at Warp 4. My navigator will send you the coordinates,” Forelni paused. “Hmmm, only Warp 5 you say? It seems Cochrane didn’t completely resolve all of his issues with his warp engines after all.”

“You’ve heard of Zefram Cochrane?”

“Oh yes, he aided my great-grandfather in building the ship that brought our forefathers to Etalya four hundred years ago.”

Archer hesitated. Cochrane hadn’t even been born four centuries ago. But before he could formulate a question, Forelni took pity on him.

“The math isn’t adding up, is it? Yet, Cochrane was part of a team that built a colony ship that left Earth in the mid-21st Century. That same ship made planetfall on Etalya four centuries ago.”

“Capitano,” Archer said carefully. “That’s doesn’t seem possible.”

“And yet, I assure you that it is. Come to Etalya, Captain. I will show you its many wonders and I will explain its greatest mystery.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Welcome to Etalya Spaceport, *Enterprise*. Proceed on course to Dock Nove. We’ll tractor you in to link-up. Prince Bari and his party will meet you there.”

“Acknowledged,” Captain Archer replied. “And thank you. Travis, take us the rest of the way in until they are ready with the tractor.”

Archer watched as the planet grew larger on the viewscreen. It was a beautiful blue-green world that looked remarkably Earth-like. It had three major oceans, four land masses and a collection of island chains.

“It is an M-Class planet with an atmosphere that is nearly identical to Terra,” T’Pol reported. “Its orbit around its parent star is within .4894 days of that of Terra’s. In fact, the conditions surrounding this planet so closely match Terra’s that the odds of this happening without outside interference approach absolutely impossible.”

“Are you saying that this was manufactured? By whom?”

“I do not know, Captain. I know of no species capable of doing so.”

“Are we sure we are dealing with humans?”

“According to sensors, there are nearly two billion life forms on the surface and they all read as human. Earth human, not just humanoid.”

“I see. Until we’re sure of what is going on here, I want to limit our contact. Malcolm, you have the Con. Hoshi, you’ll accompany us in case we have any linguistic issues. Commander, they seem to have had some contact with Vulcans before. You’ll come along. Please have Commander Tucker and Dr. Phlox meet us at the docking port.”

“You’re not beaming over?” Ensign Mayweather asked as he guided the ship toward the looming spaceport.

“They may not be aware of the technology,” Archer replied. “They might think it rude of us just to materialize on their spaceport.”

* * *

Once *Enterprise* had completed docking and the skyway had extended from the spaceport and securely sealed to the ship’s docking port, Archer opened the hatchway and led his four officers down the one hundred meter passage. As they exited into the concourse an honor guard, four on each side, snapped to attention. Forelni and three of his officers were gathered a few yards away.

“Welcome, Captain,” Forelni greeted after the *Enterprise*’s officers had cleared the honor guard.

“Thank you, Capitano,” Archer replied before introducing his officers.

“A pleasure,” Forelni said before indicating his officers. “My Executive Officer, Paulo Mansi. My Communications Officer, Carlita Lucchese. My Chief Engineer, Bartolo Rinaldi.”

“Capitano, forgive me but before we docked they referred to you as Prince Bari...”

“Ah yes,” a small smile formed on Forelni’s face. “On board my ship I am addressed as Capitano. Everywhere else on Etalya I am Crown Prince Bari Forelni, the firstborn son of their Highnesses, King Gioacondo Forelni and Queen Ersilla Ragone Forelni.

“Don’t tell anyone,” Forelni continued, lowering his voice as he leaned closer to Archer. “But I very much prefer Capitano Forelni.”

The two men shared a chuckle born from a mutual understanding only ship commanders could understand.

“Surely this is not all of your crew, Captain?”

“No it isn’t,” Archer admitted. “We didn’t want to presume.”

“And you wanted to make sure all was as it seems here before exposing your entire crew,” Forelni finished keeping an accusatory tone out of his voice. “A wise precaution, if an unnecessary one. I assure you, Captain, you are among friends here. Come, let me show you and set your minds at ease.”

“Capitano,” Tucker spoke up. “You seemed to imply that your ship could do better than Warp 5.”

“Indeed, Commander. We can easily cruise at Warp 7 and in an emergency attain Warp 8, but not for an extended period of time. Would you like to see how?”

“Certainly!”

“Bartolo, would you be so kind?”

“Of course, Capitano,” the big man replied smiling. “Come along my friend. I will show you my ship and perhaps you will give me a tour of yours?”

“I think that would be just fine,” Archer replied with a nod to Tucker. The two Engineers quickly headed off toward the docking port where *Sicilia* was berthed.

“Tell me Captain,” Forelni asked as they watched to two men. “Have you ever noticed that we just command the ships while our Chief Engineers own them?”

“It does seem to be a universal trait,” Archer agreed.

“Well, while your Engineer is touring my ship allow me to give you a tour of my home world. We have a transport standing by to take us down. In fifteen minutes you’ll be breathing fresh Etalyian air.”

As traversed the concourse to the waiting transport they passed a transporter pad just as a load of cargo was beamed away.

“You have transporters?” Archer asked. “Why don’t we just transport down?”

“When we developed the technology,” Forelni explained. “It was decided that no sentient beings would ever be transported. It was decided that the act of transporting a living being was an act of murder, even if an exact duplicate of the original was created at the other end of the transport. My grandfather made it a royal decree.”

“We had that discussion when we started using transporters,” Archer said. “We determined that it was still the original person.”

“I would tend to agree with you, Captain. When I ascend to the throne, I’ll have to look into reversing my grandfather’s decision. Although, it has been around for nearly two centuries. It might not be an easy thing to accomplish.”

They reached the access hatch for the transport, a small cylindrical vessel that could easily accommodate the seven of them. Archer shot a puzzled look at their host.

“The math isn’t adding up again is it?” Forelni said smiling. “How could my grandfather be making decrees two hundred years ago?”

“Tell me, Doctor,” Forelni addressed Phlox. “How old would you say I am?”

Phlox looked Forelni over for a minute then made his judgment.

“I would say you are no older than thirty.”

“I just celebrated my fifty-fifth birthday, Doctor, and an Etalyian year is almost exactly the same as it was on Earth when my great-grandfather left over a century ago.”

“Capitano,” T’Pol spoke up. “Your claims are not logical. You say your great-grandfather left Earth a century ago, yet you say your people have been here for nearly four centuries.”

“As I said, Commander,” Forelni agreed as they settled into their seats on the transport. “The math doesn’t add up. Yet, what I have said is all true. When Genoa Forelni led his refugees away from Earth, they were using a new engine based on an unproven theory.

It worked just as they had expected, creating a wormhole that was supposed to lead them to a specific star system.

“But when they emerged from the wormhole they discovered they were nowhere near that system,” Forelni continued as the transport ship pulled away from the dock. “Instead, they found themselves here. A yellow star very much like Sol with six planets, with one habitable, Etalya, and some moons that could support life. Since they had come across a perfect world to colonize, they put it down to a happy accident and settled in. Eventually they discovered where in the galaxy they’d ended up and how far from Earth they’d traveled. Shortly after that they discovered they also traveled backward in time during their time inside the wormhole.”

Forelni paused as the ship was jostled slightly as it penetrated the heavier air of the planet’s atmosphere.

“It took some time, but they finally determined that while that had departed in 2048 Earth time, they were now somewhere in the 1770s as far as Earth was concerned. We were too far away to see Earth. It wasn’t until we started receiving broadcast signals that we were able to determine exactly how far back the colony ship had traveled. We officially placed the year of our arrival at 1772.”

Forelni paused to let that sink in.

“But that doesn’t explain the aging,” Phlox said.

“I don’t know that we’ve been able to fully explain it ourselves, Doctor. Our best theory is that a combination of traveling through the wormhole, coupled with the conditions on the planet somehow rewrote the DNA of the original colonists and has carried down to their descendants. The average lifespan of an Etlanian is somewhere between two hundred and eighty to three hundred and forty years.”

“That’s nearly double that of humans on Earth today,” Archer remarked.

“If we could study the phenomenon,” Phlox said. “Think of what it would mean...”

“You are most welcome to meet with our scientists and discuss this, Doctor. Though I fear we can never recreate the circumstances that led to this in the first place.”

“Why do you say that, Capitano?”

“Because we have one other theory regarding our ancestors trip here,” Forelni said. “We don’t think this was all an accident of fate. We have come to believe that someone, or something, not only diverted the colony ship here, but also altered those inside.”

“But why?” Archer asked.

“That, Captain,” Forelni replied as the transport ship touched down. “Is perhaps the greatest mystery of Etalya and we’ve not come an inch closer to solving it in four centuries.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“That is some impressive architecture,” Archer remarked, looking at a massive building next to the landing pad.

“That,” Forelni replied, “is the Grand Palazzo. It is the official home of the King and Queen as well as the Consiglio of Dodici. When our ancestors landed here, they insisted on making Genoa their King and the Forelni’s the Royal Family in gratitude for leading them to this new world. Genoa was wary of setting up a true monarchy after fleeing so many despots back on Earth.

“So he acquiesced on one condition,” Forelni continued. “He established a ruling council made up of a dozen members to be elected by the people. This council would pass laws and make day-to-day decisions regarding the running of government. In the event of a tie, the King would cast the deciding vote. In certain circumstances, the King could overrule the decision of the Consiglio, but it has happened only very rarely. And the King has the final authority on declaring war. It does not sound like any monarchy

you may have heard of, Captain, but it has worked here for four centuries now.”

“From what I have seen so far I can’t argue with that.”

“Well, there is still much more for you to see and I hope your opinion of us will not change once we have shown you more. Unfortunately, I am required to present myself to their Majesties so I must ask Paulo to escort you to my dimora. It is not as spacious as the Grand Palazzo, but he can arrange quarters for you there and then take you on a tour of the capital city until I can rejoin you.”

“Of course,” Paulo said, stepping forward as Forelni turned toward the Grand Palazzo’s entrance. “Captain, if you and your party will follow me. We could take a flitter, but it is not that far to walk and it would allow me to show you one or two things of interest...”

“I think we could use a stretch of the legs in fresh air,” Archer agreed. “Lead on.”

Forelni paused at the entrance to watch the Earth party walk away then, returning the guards’ salutes, passed through the open entrance and into the great foyer. He stopped suddenly, seeing his brother, Francesco, beckoning to him from the passage that led to the King’s private office. Forelni turned away from where the Royal chamber lay, where the King and

Queen normally conducted official business, and clasped arms with his brother.

“I’m supposed to report to our parents first, brother,” Forelni said, asking without asking why he was being detoured.

“Father wants to see you in here instead,” Francesco replied. “Only you could go out hunting Klingons and come back with an Earth ship.”

“These particular Klingons were dumb, making them easy prey. As for the Earth ship, they are our guests, not our prize, Francesco.”

“Of course,” the younger prince opened the door and allowed his brother to enter the King’s office first. “You can tell father all about it.”

“But not mother?” Forelni stepped in waited for the King to rise from his chair and approach.

“Our mother and sister are away on an inspection tour of New Sicily.”

“With Klingon ships known to be in our space?” Forelni thundered in shock. “They decide to travel to visit a moon of Acquatico, nearly as far away from Etalya as you can get in our system? When did this happen?”

“They departed the day before yesterday. There have been no reports of any trouble.”

“How many ships are escorting them?” Forelni asked, doing the inventory in his head of available ships that could have served as suitable escort and not liking the numbers.

“None,” Francesco was too calm to suit his brother’s temperament. “They are traveling on the *Crociera la Vista*.”

“Are you insane? A civilian cruise ship?”

“I see my sons are arguing once more,” the King interrupted with a sigh.

“That, father, is because your youngest son has taken leave of his senses. Would it be too much to ask that you at least put our ships on alert to be ready to respond to a call for aid from the *Crociera la Vista*, brother? And send the *Littorio* out in that general direction.”

“That seems like an excessive response,” Francesco balked. “As Comandante of Etalya planetary defense forces...”

“You are subject to my orders as Comandante of Etalyian space defense,” Forelni cut his brother off.

“It does seem prudent, Francesco,” the King agreed softly. “Given the recent incursion in our space.”

“Very well, Father,” Francesco acceded with a bow to his father and an angry glance at his brother before pivoting sharply and storming out of the room.

“Come, my son, let us walk awhile and cool our tongues,” the King paused as the walked outside into the Grand Palazzo’s main garden. “You are far too hard on your brother, Bari. He is only thirty-five years of age.”

“Old enough to know better,” Forelni replied, still angered by his brother’s actions.

“Perhaps, but consider how hard it is for him to always be in your shadow,” the King held up a hand to stave off a protest. “You underestimate your popularity with the people, my son. You’re the only member of the royal family to be voted onto the Consiglio in our entire history. I daresay many if not all of them would follow you anywhere on nothing more than your asking of it. Most would die for you without hesitation.”

“I think you are overstating this.”

“Oh? Consider why this would be so. Some three decades back, when that young girl fell into the Pazza Fiume. No one dove into those raging waters after her, save one man. You. The entire planet saw the vids. Did you even think about the danger to your own person in

the half-second it took for you to see her and dive in after her?”

“She was in jeopardy, I simply went in and pulled her out of the rapids.”

“Oh, yes, simply that,” the King replied with a chuckle. “So simple that no one else, even your own guards did not think to do it. Even Paulo did not act until after you were swimming back to the bank.”

“I simply caught them by surprise by reacting faster,” Forelni dismissed.

“Deny it all you like, my son, but your people know what they saw. I know what I see. I see a man who will sit on the throne and possibly be the greatest King we have ever known. Francesco sees that too. He is merely trying to find his own path. So stop making so difficult on him.”

“As my King commands,” Forelni said, with a slightly mocking bow.

“Insolent child,” the King quipped. “So, tell me about these visitors you have brought home. You seem at ease with letting a ship and its crew from Earth roam about freely.”

“The Earth Genoa left behind has changed,” Forelni said. “We know that from the communications we have intercepted. It is time for us to reconnect with our

cousins. There is much we can learn from them, and much they can learn from us in return.”

“You seem taken by them, as always,” the King beckoned to an aide. “Inform the Crown Prince’s attaché to escort the crew of the Earth ship to the Grand Palazzo. I will receive them in the Royal Chamber.”

The King took his son by the arm and led him toward the passage to the official reception area. The sound of someone running at full speed carried down from the opposite end of the passageway. Both men pulled up and waited. A young officer in the fleet exited, skidding to a stop as he became aware of the two Royals.

“Sire,” the young man gasped, gulping in air.

“What it is, boy?” the King demanded.

“Terrible news, sire.” He spoke between gasps. “Four Klingon ships ambushed the *Crociera la Vista*. Her Majesty the Queen and Princess Gianna have been taken hostage.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“They came out of nowhere, we had no warning at all,” Capitano Valarte of the *Crociera la Vista* reported, a bloody bandage wrapped around the top of his head. What could be seen of his bridge on the viewscreen looked to be in the same condition as its’ Capitano. “They damaged our main engine and boarded us without a word. Not that we have anything capable of scratching their ships. Once they discovered the Royal Family they beamed them off the ship.”

An audible gasp from all of the Eitalyians in the room circled the briefing table. Archer, who’d been invited to join the King, the two Princes, the entire membership of the Consiglio and a handful of military advisers on the call.

“*Bastardis*,” growled one of the advisers. The King held up a hand, staving off any further commentary on the crime.

“Go on, Capitano.”

“The Klingon commander, his name was Kaln,” the Capitano paused. AT the mention of the name Bari Forelni exchanged a look with Archer.

“I suppose I should have shot him out of the sky when I had the chance, declaration of war be damned,” the Prince muttered. Archer nodded in sympathy. “I’ll want to know why my ships didn’t patrol the border after the Klingons crossed back into their territory. I’ll have someone’s head for this.”

“He walked around my ship,” the Captain of the *Crociera la Vista* continued. “He threatened to kill my crew and my passengers. Then told me to ‘crawl back home and tell your leaders what I have done here.’ He said he would wait near the border for someone to bring him a ‘rich ransom’ for the Queen and the Princess.”

Another round of muttering circled around the table. Paying a ransom was clearly an unacceptable option.

“What is the condition of your ship, Antonio?” Bari Forelni asked.

“We can make it back as long as we don’t push the engine and no one else takes any shots at us, Sire. We don’t have any critical injuries among the crew or the passengers aside from some frayed nerves.”

“We’ll dispatch a ship to escort you in,” Bari Forelni replied, motioning to an aide, who stepped forward and whispered something in the Prince’s ear. “The *Valoroso* will be there in a few hours.”

“We’ll be looking for her and thank you, Sire. If there is nothing else, I need to tend to my ship.”

“Do so, Capitano,” the King replied. “You did well to keep your ship intact against the Klingons.”

“Thank you, Sire, but I lost two of my passengers. I am not feeling like much of a Capitano right now.”

“You were outgunned and outmatched, Antonio, and I am certain both my mother and sister preferred to go with the Klingons if it kept your ship and all aboard her alive.”

Valarte nodded in acknowledgment, an understanding between ship commanders, and then signed off.

“Why not send the *Littorio* instead,” Francesco asked. “She is already on the way.”

“Because I have another task for the *Littorio*, brother. I’m sending her to get close to the Klingon fleet without alerting them she is there. I plan on taking the *Sicilia*, *Vittoria* and *Sciopero* out to rendezvous with *Littorio*. Once there, we will discover which of the ships the Queen and Princess are being held on and recover them. After we have done so, we will destroy the invading Klingon ships.”

“And the *Difesa*?” Francesco, who commanded the ship, asked. “Why is she not part of the assault fleet?”

“Because her job,” the elder Prince snapped, “and by extension, yours, is to defend Etalya itself. If this is merely a feint to draw our entire fleet away and leave our world open for attack it will fall to you and your ships to prevent it. I pray you’ll do better at that than you did at protecting our mother and sister.”

Francesco’s face reddened as he bolted out of his chair. For a moment it seemed like the Princes were about to come to blows.

“Then as my presence is no longer needed here,” Francesco turned on his heel and stormed out of the room. The King favored his eldest son with a disapproving look.

“I will report back as soon as possible,” the Prince said, turning to leave.

“Capitano,” Archer said as he too rose from his seat. “I’d like to come along, perhaps I can be of some assistance?”

“Captain, I cannot ask you to risk your ship in this conflict, nor do I think your superiors would want you to either.”

“I wasn’t talking about bringing the *Enterprise*. I meant I personally would like to tag along. Maybe a third party can find a way to resolve this without bloodshed?”

“Perhaps a cooler head would be of some use to you, my son,” the King agreed, slipping in a slight rebuke. Bari Forelni drew in a long breath and slowly let it out.

“Very well, Captain. I will see you up at Spaceport. We leave in one hour, with or without you.”

The Prince strode out of the room, towing a small gaggle of aides in his wake as he snapped out orders.

“I am glad you are going along, Captain,” the King watched his son’s departure. “My son will make a fine King when his time comes. He is usually slow to anger. But when his blood is up like this his anger doesn’t allow him to temper his responses as a King sometimes should.”

“I’ll do what I can to keep this from becoming a shooting war if possible,” Archer promised.

“Oh, I fear that might be a task not even God himself would tackle, Captain. Those Klingon ships are already forfeit. What remains to be seen is what will happen if he is unable to rescue my wife and daughter.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, Captain,” the King said deadly serious. “If they are dead, or if they are killed in the rescue attempt, my eldest son may not stop shooting until not

one single Klingon heart beats anywhere within this universe.”

CHAPTER SIX

“We have a problem,” the Capitano of the *Littorio* reported. “Only three of the Klingon ships remain in our space. The fourth has broken away and returned to Klingon space.”

“Which one?” Forelni asked.

“Kaln’s.”

“I really need to kill that man the next time I cross paths with him,” Forelni shot a withering look at Archer. “Are you close enough to scan those ships for non-Klingon life signs?”

“No. We are just outside their known sensor range but not close enough to get accurate readings. If we move closer, they’ll know we’re here.”

“I suspected as much. Stay where you are. We’ll be there in an hour,” Forelni ended the conversation and began pacing the bridge of his ship.

“Our friend Kaln is proving to be as much of a coward as we’ve thought,” Mansi remarked. “Do you suppose he’s got the hostages with him and left his other three ships to fight it out with us?”

“It’s a possibility,” Forelni admitted.

“Especially if he wants to draw you across the border and start a war,” Archer agreed.

“Technically, he’s already started a war,” Forelni pointed out. “It remains to be seen if the Klingon Empire wants to accept the invitation. The more important question right now is, where is the Queen and the Princess and how do we find out before we start shooting.”

“Are you discounting negotiation then?” Archer asked.

“It isn’t our way to ask the thief nicely to return what he has stolen, Captain,” Forelni resumed his pacing as the bridge fell silent. “We need to know where they are before we make our move.

“Paulo,” Forelni stopped short. “Summon Giordano, Rizzo, Lombardi and Moretti to the bridge.”

“What do you have in mind, Capitano?” Mansi asked after calling the four crewmen to the bridge.

“Something I hate having to do, Paulo, but I don’t see any other way.”

The four crewmen bolted onto the bridge and presented themselves to their commander. Three were younger men, the fourth was graying at his temples.

“Gentlemen,” Forelni began without preamble. “You know why we are out here. In order to mount a

rescue attempt we must know which ship the hostages are being held on before the Klingons can raise their shields. For us to succeed we need to take out the other ships and disable the ship our Queen and the Princess is on.

“The only way we can determine that without alerting the Klingons,” Forelni continued, “is to send out one man in a solo pod. It’s small enough to not be spotted by their sensors. The pilot can determine which ship they are on and transmit the information back. Of course, once the pilot transmits he will alert the Klingons of his presence.”

“It’s a one-way mission, isn’t it?” Lombardi, the older man, asked.

“Yes. We will make every effort to recover the pilot during the operation if he can maneuver around long enough to avoid their fire but the odds of that are... very high against. You are the four highest-rated pod pilots on this ship. I am asking for one of you to volunteer for this mission.”

The three younger men exchanged looks. Lombardi took one step forward.

“Are you sure, Fiori?”

“Quite, Capitano. I have lived to see my great-grandchildren and these three have just begun starting their own families.

“That is the reason why you included me, wasn’t it?” Lombardi added, lowering his voice.

“It was,” Forelni admitted as quietly before raising his voice. “Very well, then, prepare to launch as soon as we rendezvous with the *Littorio*. The rest of you are dismissed. And good luck, Fiori.”

The four men departed the bridge as quickly as they’d arrived.

“Have you ever ordered a man under your command to his death, Captain?”

“I have,” Archer replied.

“Have you ever found a way to do it without it haunting you the rest of your days?”

“Not yet.”

Forelni nodded and reclaimed his command chair.

“What is your plan after he transmits the information?” Archer asked.

“This ship will engage the ship with the hostages aboard, the *Littorio* will move against a second ship if the hostages have been split up. The other ships will engage and destroy any Klingon ship not carrying the hostages. We will disable the Klingons and beam the hostages off the ship.”

An audible gasp circled the bridge.

“Sire,” Mansi struggled to keep his voice even. “The prohibition against...”

“Has already been violated, Paulo,” Forelni cut his first officer off. “The Klingons beamed them off the *Crociera*, remember? If the originals were in fact destroyed, we are only making a copy of a copy. We’ll deal with that *after* we’ve recovered them.”

* * *

“Any word yet?” Forelni asked Lucchese at Communications.

“Nothing yet, Capitano.”

“He’s been out of sensor range for ten minutes now,” Mansi reported. “He should be right in the middle of those three ships.”

“If he’d been spotted they’d be shooting at him and we’d pick that up,” Forelni mused. “We’ll give him another hour before we come up with something else to try.”

“Capitano!” Lucchese turned from her station. “Message from the pod.”

“On speaker,” Forelni barked.

“Scanned all three,” Lombardi reported tersely. “Only one, repeat, only one non-Klingon life sign.

Tagged the ship with a beacon. I'll keep them busy as long as I can."

The transmission ended abruptly.

"Receiving the beacon loud and clear now," Lucchese confirmed.

"Then let's get moving," Forelni ordered. "We'll take the tagged ship, the rest of the fleet needs to take out the other Klingons and tell the *Littorio* to get Lombardi out of there."

The four Etalyian ships hurtled toward the Klingons.

"Why aren't they firing at the pod?" Forelni wondered. The Klingon ships turned about wildly, unaware of the approaching fleet.

"Because Lombardi isn't fleeing," Mansi reported as he scanned the area. "He's buzzing between them. They can't lock their weapons or a tractor beam on him."

Finally, the three ships broke formation, looking to put enough space between them to swat the annoying flea. It appeared to be what Lombardi had been waiting for as he turned his pod right into the engines of one of the Klingon ships not tagged. The bright explosion lit up the bridge. It also kept the remaining Klingons

distracted as the four Etylian ships fell on them without mercy.

“Disable that ship now,” Forelni ordered.

“Transporter, lock onto the non-Klingon life sign and beam her aboard.”

Lasers lanced across the Klingon ship, taking out its weapons and engines. The other three Etylian ships made short work of the other Klingon.

“Transporter?”

“Transport complete, Sire,” a voice over the speaker replied. “We have the Queen aboard.”

“Escort her to the bridge,” Forelni ordered. “Finish off the Klingon ship, Paulo.”

“Aye, Capitano,” Mansi nodded at the weapons station and the crippled Klingon ship was turned to dust and debris seconds later. The bridge remained quiet, there were no celebratory cheers. The job was not yet done. A minute later, the Queen swept onto the bridge. Most look at her as if she were an alien.

“Majesty,” Forelni addressed his mother. “I am glad we were able to recover you.”

“You had me transported,” she accused.

“It seemed the only way to recover you alive and the Klingons had already transported you. I didn’t

think you would object under the circumstances, mother.”

“I suppose not,” she relented.

“Gianna?”

“The Klingon fleet commander took her aboard his ship.”

“And fled back into Klingon space with her,” Forelni added grimly.

“And what next, my son?”

Every eye turned to the Capitano.

“I do not have the authority to invade Klingon space,” he said after a long pause, “no matter the provocation. We return the Queen to Etalya and await the King’s command. I have no doubt we will invade and recover the Princess. But when we do we will have a plan in place to retrieve her and teach the Klingons a lesson they will never forget.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Why didn’t you pursue Kaln’s ship?” Francesco thundered at his older brother. “You just let him carry off our sister without a fight!”

“Yes, chase him deep into Klingon space with just four ships,” Bari countered. “And when we caught up with him I am quite certain there would have been an entire armada waiting to welcome us.

“We were fortunate to recover the Queen and only lose one man in the battle,” he continued. “Had we done as you suggest, all would have been lost and the Klingons could claim to the rest of the universe that we were the aggressors.”

“You fear starting a war that the Klingons have already started?”

“No, brother, I fear losing a war by fighting it on the Klingons’ terms. And I fear winning that war in a way that turns all of the other species in this quadrant against us. Once this matter is settled, we are going to have to live with all of the species out there. I prefer not to be known as blood-thirsty warmongers like the Klingons.”

“Your brother is correct,” the King stood, placing a hand on his sons’ shoulders to quell the argument. “We have recovered the Queen. We will recover the Princess and extract a price for this madness from our enemies. But we will do so from the position of the wronged, with full justification for the actions we take.”

Francesco turned and stormed away.

“I am surprised at you, my son,” the King remarked as he watched his younger son’s departure. “I would have suspected you to chase down Kaln while you were closer to your quarry. Why do you think it was a trap?”

“Because its what I would have done if I were him.”

The King chuckled and threw a look at Archer, who was standing quietly to one side.

“Be careful of my eldest son, Captain,” the King said, a ghost of a smile tugging at his worried features. “He is a ruthless tactician. A fact I discovered too late the first time I played chess with him.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, your majesty,” Archer replied with a slight smile of his own. “I have reported to Earth what has happened here. We are working with our allies to try and help secure your daughter’s safe return.”

“I thank you for that, Captain. Please relay my planet’s gratitude for their efforts on our behalf.”

“It’s the least we can do for ‘family’, sir.”

“How is mother doing?” Bari asked, changing the subject.

“The doctors have examined her and find no change in her considering she has been transported twice,” the King reported.

“Which I have been saying all along...”

“Yes,” the King held up a hand to forestall a renewal of an old argument. “Your mother accepts the logic of why she was transported. Accepting the fact that she was, and she being the biggest proponent of the prohibition against transporting sentient beings, is going to take some time.”

“Meaning she’s still mad at me.”

“Indeed,” the King sighed. “We’ll have to move you to the far end of the table for dinner for a few days. But your mother will come around. Your focus now is your sister.”

“What are you going to do, if you don’t mind my asking?” Archer stepped forward and spoke softly.

“We wait,” Bari replied. “Until the Klingons reply we can’t do anything.”

“Why not?”

“Because we do not know where she is being held and we won’t know that until the Klingons contact us so we can demand proof of life. Once they allow Gianna to speak to us, we’ll know exactly where she is and can move accordingly.”

“I doubt they’ll show much of her surroundings,” Archer remarked. “And they aren’t likely to come out and give you her coordinates.”

“They won’t have to, Captain,” Bari said, casting a look at his father.

“Go ahead, they were your idea to begin with and it seems you were prescient about the need for them.”

“The Royal Family would always be a target for kidnapping and ransom,” Bari explained. “Especially with the Klingons roaming around. So we each carry on our person a crystal. Deep within the crystal lies a device. Once the Klingons put her on screen for the proof of life, that device will activate and piggyback onto the transmission, sending us a signal with her exact location. Once it does that, we’ll know where to find her.”

“And then?” Archer asked.

“Then we recover the Princess and give the Klingons a reminder of why they should never again enter our space.”

“Can you get in and out of there that easy?”

“Oh yes, Captain, we can. The hard part will be when we get close. To pinpoint her location we’ll have to send another man out in a pod.. The odds are he will fare no better than Lombardi. Another debt the Klingons will pay dearly for.”

“Father,” Bari turned suddenly, remembering something. “At Lombardi’s funeral yesterday, I noticed his grandson...”

“I was informed, son,” the King interrupted. “The matter is being tended to. None of Lombardi’s family will ever want for anything ever again.”

The trio fell silent as Archer thought back to the memorial service the day before for the crewman who’d sacrificed his life to rescue his Queen. It was the Eitalyan tradition that the Capitano escorted the body of a fallen crewman under his command. There had been no body to bring back. Only a flag and platitudes that seemed as empty as Lombardi’s grave.

“Your majesties,” someone called out, breaking Archer’s reverie. “A signal. From Qo’nos itself. It is the Klingon Chancellor.”

“On screen,” the King commanded.

The screen flared to life showing the chamber of the Klingon High Council. Commanding most of the view was the graying Klingon Chancellor. But enough of the chamber was visible to reveal the Princess Gianna standing with a Klingon blade to her throat. A blade held by a smiling Kaln.

“I guess they are going to give us the coordinates after all,” Bari whispered to Archer, who nodded in surprise.

“Greetings, Chancellor,” the King began, keeping his voice calm but firm. “I suppose you are calling to discuss the terms of returning that which you have stolen?”

“No, I am not. You destroyed three of my ships...”

“Ships that were in our space illegally,” the King countered. “Ships that attacked an unarmed civilian ship and kidnapped two of its passengers.”

“War criminals, not passengers,” the Klingon thundered.

“Until your ships carried out this attack, there was no state of war between our peoples. We are willing to overlook the matter, provided you return the Princess to us unharmed.”

“Again, you misunderstand,” the Chancellor growled. “We tire of your interference in our plans to conquer all that we are destined to rule. You are in our way. Today, we start to remove that impediment.”

The Chancellor turned his head and nodded.

“This is not a negotiation of terms you were invited to, Etalyian. It is an execution.”

Before any word of protest could be uttered, Kaln quickly whipped the blade behind the Princess and thrust it through her back, the bloody tip protruding from her chest. Her mouth and eyes flared wide open. Kaln savagely withdrew the blade and let go of the body, letting it slump to the floor as the viewscreen went black.

A shocked silence filled the room. Bari looked at his father, who stared at the darkened screen in shock and horror. He had no doubt that he wore the same expression.

“Father,” he said softly, placing a hand on the older man’s arm. The King shook himself visibly and turned to look at his son.

“You know what to do, my son,” the King replied. “I will tell your mother what has...”

His voice trailed off as he turned away and slowly walked out.

“I do not wish to seem unkind, Captain,” Bari said quietly as he watched his father. “But it is time for you to return to your ship and for your ship to return home. When this is over, you will be welcomed back but you do not need involve your government in what will come.

“Tell them,” Bari continued, “when you get back, all that happened here. Tell them that today, there were Klingons and there were Etalyians.”

“And tomorrow?” Archer asked.

“Tomorrow?” Bari answered. “Tell them that tomorrow, there will only be Etalyians.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Your new friend wasn’t kidding, Captain,” Admiral Gibson’s face, dominating the main screen on the bridge of the *Enterprise*, looked grim.

“How so, sir?” Archer asked, remembering the last words Forelni had spoken to him back on Etalya.

“They’ve shot the hell out of the Klingon fleet,” Gibson explained. “Those they haven’t damaged or destroyed, are running all over Klingon space trying to track down the Etalyian ships without effect. Our intelligence reports indicate the Klingons have taken major damage to several military installations as well.”

“How long can they keep that up?”

“For as long as they want to as far as we can tell,” Gibson shook his head as he scanned the reports in front of him. “Despite what the Klingons are telling their people, we cannot confirm a single Etalyian ship destroyed or even damaged enough to be captured. The Klingons may have started with an advantage in ships, but the Etalyians are cutting that down by the hour.”

Gibson set aside the reports and looked directly at the camera on his end of the conversation.

“Which is why I’m calling you, Captain. For now, the Klingons are fighting this war without drawing their ships away from their border with the Romulans. Eventually, they are going to have to do so.

“However, the instant they do so they leave themselves wide open for a Romulan incursion into their territory,” Gibson continued. “I’m sure you’ll agree the Romulans wouldn’t pass up a chance to make the Klingons fight a two-front war. Even if the Klingons leave their border fleet in place, eventually the Etalyians will pick off enough ships to leave the Klingons too weak to fight off the Romulans anyway.”

“This doesn’t sound good for the Empire, sir.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Gibson agreed. “Nor is it so good for the quadrant. If the Romulans do invade then in all likelihood we’re looking at a war that could drag everyone else into the fray. The Vulcans are trying to negotiate a truce before things go too far, if they haven’t already.

“They’ve asked us to have a word with our ‘cousins’ about calling off the dogs,” Gibson continued. “You’re right there on the border and you’ve already been introduced. I want you to return to Etalya and begin negotiating a stand down and withdrawal of their forces in Klingon space.”

Archer glanced around his bridge. By the look on his bridge crews' faces he gathered they shared his skepticism.

"Admiral," Archer began carefully. "The impression I got when I left Etalya has me doubting they are going to be amenable to outside interference."

"I've read your reports, Captain," the Admiral replied kindly. "And I got the same impression. But if we can't put a stop to this a lot of people are going to die. We have to try."

"Aye, sir, we'll do our best. What am I authorized to offer in exchange for the stand down?"

"Given the circumstances, Captain, I'm inclined to tell you to offer whatever it takes to get them to withdraw. If the Vulcans can get the Klingons to do the same, we may keep this from getting any worse. Good luck, Captain."

"Thank you, sir," Archer replied as the screen faded to black and reverted back to an outside view of the space his ship occupied. A hush fell over the bridge as the seriousness of their mission settled in.

"Travis," Archer broke the silence. "Set a course back to Etalya, maximum speed. Hoshi, send a message to the planet and let them know we're coming on a diplomatic mission. Repeat the message every half hour until we get a response and clearance to

approach. Malcolm, make sure we're ready in case we get an unfriendly welcome."

The three officers acknowledged their orders and got busy carrying them out. Archer drifted over to the science station and addressed his first officer.

"Assuming we can talk the Etlavians into doing so," he began. "How likely is it that your people can talk sense into the Klingons. Granted they started this mess by assassinating the Princess, but I'm having a hard time believing they are just going to forget what the Etlavians have done to them."

"The Klingons are most stubborn," T'Pol agreed. "Their warrior mentality will be an impediment to a successful détente. However, even the Klingons must accept reality. If Admiral Gibson's information is accurate, they will not be in a position to escalate the conflict in the foreseeable if they wish to survive as an Empire."

"I have a feeling, Commander, that Klingon pride will trump Klingon logic. I hope Vulcan logic fares better."

"Hope is illogical, Captain," T'Pol said coolly. "However, given what is at stake, perhaps a little 'hope' is exactly what is needed."

"If a Vulcan can hope, Commander, then perhaps we have a chance after all."

“Captain,” Hoshi called out from her communications station. “Our signal to Etalya has been received and acknowledged. We are granted clearance to return to Etalya and enter orbit.”

“Acknowledge them and send my thanks,” Archer replied with a slight smile. “I’ll take that as a good omen.”

The *Enterprise* streaked across the border that marked Etalyian space even as a Vulcan envoy flew to meet with the Klingon Ambassador. Both ships sailing on missions to stop a galactic war from starting.

Deep within the space claimed by the Empire, Klingon ships clashed with Etalyian vessels and the bloodshed continued unabated. As the ships battled, the rest of the quadrant teetered on the brink of a war that no one could lay claim to as its winner.

CHAPTER NINE

“Captain Archer,” the King settled on his throne in the great hall. “I appreciate the point you are making. And I understand your superiors’ concerns. The last thing I would want is for Etalya to spark an intergalactic war.”

“Then you will send word to your ships to withdraw from Klingon space?” Archer couldn’t keep a hopeful tone from his voice as he addressed the planet’s monarch.

“I would consider doing so, Captain. But even if I should decide to end hostilities with the Klingons, I would not be able to do so.”

The reply caught Archer short and he failed to keep the dismay from his face.

“But why...?”

“Captain,” the King interrupted. “We have been dealing with Klingon hostility for a very long time. We tolerated their occasional forays into our space only because they failed to even inconvenience us.

“But this...,” anger and grief caught in the ruler’s throat and he was a moment recovering it. “They

kidnapped my wife. Murdered my only daughter in cold blood.”

“And they have paid a steep price for their crimes, sir,” Archer argued. “You’ve seen the same reports we have. The losses on the Klingon side are massive. Surely you have exacted enough revenge by now.”

“We are not seeking revenge, Captain. We are seeking justice. We are seeking an assurance that the Klingons will never again threaten my people.”

“Even if it means exterminating an entire race and putting billions of other lives in jeopardy?”

“You have a dramatic way of making your point, Captain.”

“Would you at least consider sending our concerns to the Prince?” Archer made one last pitch. “Perhaps he can accomplish your objectives without drawing in the Romulans and the rest of the quadrant?”

“We have had to plan to deal with Klingons for a very long time and my son has been planning a possible invasion for decades. If anyone could find a way to adjust to our battle plans on the fly, it would be him

“But there is one problem, Captain,” the King continued with a sigh. “There is no way for us to get any such message to him.”

“Why not?”

“His plan called for his fleet to cut off all communications with Etalya once they crossed the border. We haven’t heard a single word from any of our ships since they departed our space. Your reports are the first we’ve heard how the invasion progresses.”

“You mean...”

“We won’t hear a word from him or his fleet until they return to Etalyian space. This war will end when he decides the Klingons have paid for their crimes and not one second before.”

* * *

The *Sicilia* and two other Etalyian ships held station within an asteroid field in the system of Qo’noS. It had taken them the better part of three weeks to work themselves into this position after the initial strike against a major Klingon military base at Forcas IV.

All thirty Etalyian warships had struck the base in a battle that was more massacre than battle. Within two hours, nothing of the base or the Klingon ships in orbit remained. From there the ship broke away in packs of three and scattered throughout Klingon space.

Striking in hit and run fashion, the ten mini-fleets had the Klingons tied up in knots. Adding to the confusion, by design, three other Etalyian vessels were

bearing the name of the fleet commander's flagship. It seemed to the Klingons that the *Sicilia* was flying about space at Warp Thirty. None of the groups communicated with the other, keeping the Klingons from intercepting messages and figuring out what the next target was.

The disadvantage to Forelni, was that he had no way to make any adjustments to the attack plans. Fortunately, according to the intercepts between the Klingon ships and Qo'noS, he was able to piece together how well the invasion was proceeding as his three-ship fleet closed in on its target: The Klingon homeworld.

So far, against all odds, the Klingons hadn't been able to claim a single Etalyian ship destroyed during the campaign. The losses, at least those the Klingons were openly admitting to, were adding up. Their enemy had paid a heavy price for their Chancellor's act of murder.

Perhaps too high, Forelni mused as he sat in his command chair. *Well, there is only a little more left for them to pay before we can mark them as paid in full.*

"Capitano?"

"Yes, Paulo?" he addressed his Executive Officer.

"We've received a tight beam message from one of the *Littorio*'s pods. He's in position in orbit over

Qo'noS. The *Littorio*'s group is in position and will proceed as planned in three hours."

"Excellent," Forelni allowed a slight smile to form. "The forces around Qo'noS are forming up in preparation to depart."

"The *Todaro*'s attack appears to have succeeded."

"Indeed, Capitano, and they managed to let 'slip' where their next 'destination' was going to be and when they were going to strike."

"So it appears," Forelni agreed. "In three hours, the *Littorio* breaks radio silence and allows herself and her group to be spotted when they send a general strike message to the fleet. And when they sign that message as the *Sicilia*, every one of those ships will take off after her."

"Leaving Qo'noS wide open," Paulo finished. "How many of the other groups are out there in position?"

"Enough, Paulo, enough. Even if it is just our three ships it will be enough," Forelni paused. "Did he mention Kaln's ship in his report?"

"He did," Paulo confirmed. "Kaln's ship is in orbital dock and is not showing signs of being readied for action. Perhaps Kaln has already been executed?"

I'm sure the Chancellor is already wishing he'd never laid eyes on that *Merda*."

"Perhaps," Forelni agreed. "If he isn't already dead, he will be before we are through here."

"Capitano," Paulo lowered his voice. "You haven't clarified the rules of engagement. Once the planet's defenses have been neutralized what are your intentions regarding the civilian population?"

"Are you asking me if I intend to burn Qo'noS to a cinder, Paulo?"

The Exec felt his blood run cold. They had been friends since childhood and he, more than anyone outside the Royal Family, knew the Prince's temper. The icy cool manner that Forelni had asked that question frightened the Exec.

"Are you?"

"I haven't decided yet."

CHAPTER TEN

“Utter one more syllable, Kaln,” the Klingon Chancellor bellowed, the point of his drawn *d’k tahg* digging into the Klingon Commander’s throat. “Even the slightest sound and I will gut you were you stand and feed you to my Targ while your heart is still beating.”

Kaln wisely kept his mouth shut, and his head intact with his neck, as a thin trickle of purple blood dripped down his tunic and onto the floor of the High Council.

“It is because of your...,” the Chancellor struggled to find the right word. “...stupidity that we are in this situation.”

“I was obeying my orders,” Kaln braved against the threat of the *d’k tahg*.

“Your orders were to harass Etalyian shipping among their outer worlds,” the Chancellor reminded as he withdrew the blade and stepped closer. “Not to attack the Royal transport, kidnap their Queen and bring their Princess into Klingon space!”

Kaln remained silent as the Chancellor sheathed his blade and stormed away a few paces, muttering curses under his breath.

“It was clear that we intended to go to war with Etalya,” he ventured when the Chancellor fell silent.

“Yes, that was our intent,” the Chancellor agreed, spinning back around to face the disgraced Commander. “At a time of *our* choosing. After we had finished gathering intelligence on their fleet strength and capabilities, once we had formulated our strategies and gathered our resources. Then we would begin on the offensive.

“Not,” the Chancellor’s bellow rose to a new decibel level, “having to fight a defensive action against an overwhelming invasion force because of some addled-brained *QI’yaH!*”

Even those not the target of that last insult stiffened. No Klingon could take such an insult and remain silent. Yet, in Kaln’s circumstance, he had no other choice but to suffer it in silent shame.

“Then allow me to regain my honor,” Kaln finally spoke, his voice barely audible in the hall. “Allow me and my ship to leave orbit and face Forelni. I will bring the shattered remains of his hull to you.”

“I think you’ve done quite enough already, Kaln,” the Chancellor growled. “When you brought your hostage into Klingon space, you signed her death warrant, as well as your own. Now I must do whatever

I can see to it that you have not signed the death warrant for our entire Empire.

“Take this *petaQ* from my sight and lock him away,” the Chancellor ordered his guards, turning his back on Kaln. “His stench offends my nose.”

Two guards, huge even by Klingon standards, grabbed an arm of the unarmed Commander and hauled him toward the exit that led to the dungeons below the Great Hall. Two more guards, each carrying an intimidating painstik followed closely behind. Their expressions conveying their earnest desire for Kaln to be a coward and make a break for it. Kaln made no such bid for his freedom and the heavy door slammed behind him as his escorts hauled him into the pit below.

The Chancellor sat down heavily upon his throne, glancing at the latest intelligence report on the status of the war before throwing it aside in disgust. No one asked him what the report conveyed, the look on his face said all that was needed.

“I am surprised you didn’t kill him on the spot,” K’enbgh, one of the Chancellor’s closest advisors, remarked. “He clearly cannot be allowed to live.”

“No, he cannot,” the Chancellor agreed. “But perhaps the time and circumstance of his departure from this life can be of service to the Empire yet.”

“How so?”

“You have seen the same battle reports that I have, old friend. Barring the miraculous resurrection of Kahless himself, I have no doubt in my mind that devil Forelni and his fleet will arrive at Qo’noS sooner rather than later.”

“And when he does?”

“Then to save the Empire,” the Chancellor growled softly, “we will feed him that *petaQ* and that garbage scow he commands and hope that is enough to spare the rest of our Empire.”

“It was Kaln’s blade that struck the blow that began this,” K’enbgh pointed out. “But it was your order that sent that blade into action. How can you be certain Kaln’s head and ship will prove sufficient?”

“I don’t,” the Chancellor admitted. “But we make that move when, and if, the time comes. If that is not sufficient, we have one last move to play to save what we can.”

“Against a Romulan, a Vulcan or even an Earther that move might work,” K’enbgh remarked. “Against someone capable of leading the kind of barbarism we are seeing...?”

“What else can we do? We will play the game out to its conclusion and if it is the fate of the Empire to

die at the hands of this man, then we will fight to the last breath with honor and I will see you in Sto-vokor.”

The two older Klingons fell silent, condemned men waiting for the executioner’s blade to fall upon their necks. Proud warriors facing the unthinkable, the destruction of the Empire they’d served their entire lives. A warrior dashed into the Great Hall holding a data pad and shouting for the Chancellor’s attention.

“Chancellor, we have him!”

“Have who?”

“The *Sicilia* was spotted, her course has her on the way to Morska,” the warrior reported. “A message was intercepted ordering the Etalyian fleet to attack the orbital depot at Morska.”

“General Merj and his fleet...?”

“Are in perfect position to intercept the *Sicilia*. He asks for home fleet to be dispatched to close in behind the Etalyian ships.”

“We can crush his fleet between our two fleets,” K’enbgh exclaimed. “Forelni is sailing straight into the jaws of death.”

“Indeed,” the Chancellor agreed. “Perhaps our miracle has come just in time. Order every ship between here and Morska to join up with Merj. I want

that troublesome Forelni and his ships reduced to dust!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Flash report, Capitano!”

the *Sicilia*’s communications officer called out. “The Klingon fleet has broken orbit above Qo’noS at high warp. They are on course for Morska.”

“They’ve taken the bait!” Paulo exclaimed.

“Indeed they have,” Forelni nodded in approval to his Exec. “Any update on Kaln’s ship?”

“Still in dock, Capitano,” Communications confirmed.

“Send a flash message to the other groups,” Forelni ordered. “Include the locations of the planetary defense stations. I want them taken out first. Whichever group is closest to the dock is to take it, and Kaln’s ship, out.”

“Aye, Capitano!”

“And if Kaln is still on his ship when it is destroyed?” Paulo asked.

“Then I will reward that ship’s Capitano handsomely,” Forelni replied. “Hopefully, that vermin is still down on the surface so I can have the pleasure of killing him myself. In the meantime, Paulo, order

the fleet to attack and get us heading for Qo'noS right now."

The two ships accompanying the *Sicilia* followed the flagship out from a cluster of asteroids not far from the Klingon homeworld. No longer needing to remain in hiding, the ship's sensors scanned the system. A wolfish smile spread across Forelni's face as he saw every group, save the *Littorio*'s group that was serving as a decoy, break out of hiding and sprint toward Qo'noS.

"We haven't lost a single ship," Paulo couldn't keep the awe from his voice as he looked at the sensor readout screen on Forelni's command panel. "What an incredible victory this is, Capitano."

"Let us wait until the final battle is over before we start the celebrations, my friend," Forelni cautioned. "But I share your sentiments. I myself could not dare to dream we would escape unscathed like this."

"Messages coming in, Capitano. *Trieste*'s group is attacking the dock. *Audace*'s, *Scire*'s and *Sparviero*'s groups are attacking planetary defense stations and command and control installations."

"Very good," Forelni replied. "Navigation?"

"Lined up for orbital insertion and geo-synchronous orbit above the capital city in three minutes, Capitano."

“Weapons?”

“All weapons hot and ready to fire on your command, Capitano!”

“Capitano, look!” Paulo exclaimed pointing to the sensor readout. “That’s the *K’Toch*, the Chancellor’s personal flagship and she’s heading back toward Qo’noS.”

“I doubt the Chancellor is aboard at a time like this,” Forelni noted with a scowl. “Have the *Zeffrio* disable the *K’Toch* and take it in tow. We’ll see what we’ve caught in our net after we’ve got Qo’noS under control.”

The *Zeffrio* peeled away to corral the Klingon ship while the *Sicilia* and her other escort continued on. Caught unawares, the planetary defenses fell to the Etylian fleet, getting off a handful of ineffective shots before falling to enemy bombardment. The dock holding Kaln’s ship, as well as the Klingon ship itself, never even had time to raise its shields before being reduced to atoms. In less than fifteen minutes, Qo’noS had fallen.

Shock reigned in the Great Hall as the Chancellor was faced with the unthinkable: His planet was under the guns of a dozen armed Etylian ships and he couldn’t even so much as throw a stone at them in defense.

“Hail the Commander of that fleet,” the Chancellor rasped, defeat tightening his throat. “Ask him what his terms are.”

* * * * *

“Message from the *Zeffrio*,” Communications called out. “They have the *K'Toch* in tow and will be entering orbit in two minutes. They report the Chancellor’s family is aboard, but not the Chancellor.”

“Weapons,” Forelni punched in a set of commands. “When the *K'Toch* is in range, this is what I want you to do. Then stand by for further orders.”

Paulo leaned over so he could see what Forelni was ordering. He tried to keep his face neutral.

“Objections?” Forelni asked.

“Reservations, Capitano.”

“We’re being hailed by the Chancellor,” Communications interrupted before Forelni could respond.

“On screen,” Forelni ordered and the Klingon Chancellor appeared. He looked nothing like the belligerent Klingon of a few weeks before. Now he looked old and beaten. Behind him, Kaln and the members of the High Council stood in silent defeat.

“What are your terms, Eitalian,” the Chancellor muttered in a barely audible tone.

“First this,” Forelni replied then stabbed a button on his panel. “Transporter, do you have a lock yet.”

“We do, Capitano.”

“Then begin transport.”

Kaln disappeared in the glitter-glow of a transporter beam.

“And beam him out into space,” Forelni continued. “Widest possible dispersion.”

Even the crew on his own bridge paled at that order but no one raised an objection.

“Transport complete,” the officer reported quietly.

“Weapons,” Forelni intoned, his voice flat and space cold as he stared down the image of the Chancellor on the screen. “Execute phase one.”

A beam lanced out from the *Sicilia* and bathed the *K'Toch* in blue light. A view of the interior of the Klingon ship appeared on a smaller screen, a view being transmitted to the Chancellor below. Every Klingon on the *K'Toch* crumpled to the deck.

“Dead?” the Chancellor asked.

“Stunned,” Forelni replied. “Weapons. Phase two.”

“Phasers locked on the K’Toch,” the officer replied. “Tight beam, low power as ordered.”

“What are you going to do?” the Chancellor demanded.

“I’m going to drill a series of very small holes into the *K’Toch*,” Forelni replied. “Not big enough for her to implode, but enough for the air to slowly bleed out. The level of stun we used has left every Klingon conscious enough to be aware of what is happening to them. They will know they are suffocating and will be powerless to do anything about it.”

“You monster...!” the Chancellor bellowed, but Forelni cut him off.

“Monster? Who invaded our space, seized our ship, kidnapped our people and butchered an innocent woman for no reason other than to satisfy your own bloodthirst?

“You dare call me monster, Klingon,” Forelni matched the Klingon’s bellow. “By rights I should reduce that ship to dust and burn your world to a cinder for what you have done!”

The Chancellor tried to rally some semblance of protest, but the sudden defeat had knocked all of the bluster from him. He bowed his head, accepting his fate.

“You asked for my terms, Klingon.” Forelni said in a calm, quiet tone that froze the blood of all that heard it, Etalyian and Klingon. “Raise your damned head and hear them.”

The Chancellor raised his head and waited.

“You will remember my hand on your throat, Klingon. You will remember that all I need do is order phase three to be executed and Qo’noS is no more, nor is any of your family. You will remember this day and how easily we defeated you.

“Because if any Klingon ship ever again is found so much as a meter inside Etalyian space,” Forelni continued, “We will return. This time we will not stay our hand or our wrath until no Klingon lives anywhere within this universe. Do you understand?”

The Chancellor nodded.

“I need to hear you say it, Klingon.”

“I understand.”

“I am withdrawing my ships, Klingon. Do not give me a reason to send them back here.”

Forelni waved for the transmission to be cut and the screen went black.

“Order the fleet to return to Etalyian space, Paulo, and make sure the *Littorio* and her escorts are on their way out before we leave Klingon space.”

Paulo relayed the orders then turned to Forelni in surprise.

“You were prepared to exterminate everything on that planet,” he said softly, having seen what phase three entailed. “What changed your mind?”

“We accomplished what we came here to do, Paulo,” Forelni replied. “My sister’s murderer is dead by my order. The Klingons have been punished for the invasion of our space and the taking of our ship and the Queen. Our retribution is justified.

“But if we had continued on,” Forelni continued. “We would be no better than the Klingons. We would have become murderers. The thin line between justice and revenge, Paulo. We dangled perilously over that edge. *I* dangled perilously over that edge.”

Forelni fell quiet as his fleet broke orbit, heading back toward home at top speed.

“We are going to reclaim our place with the rest of the human race now that a ship from Earth has visited us. We are going to become a part of the galactic family too. We will not do so as blood-thirsty warmongers, Paulo. Not at my hands at least.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“It would appear that you arrived just in time for the celebrations, Captain,” Admiral Gibson remarked.

“So it would seem, Admiral,” Archer agreed. “We’d just entered orbit when the message from the Ealyian flagship arrived.”

“Have you been given any additional information from the Ealyian government regarding the withdrawal? Not that I am complaining that hostilities have ended mind you, but it strikes me as odd that they would let the Klingons off the hook for no reason.”

“You know as much as we do, sir,” Archer replied. “And until Prince Bari returns to make his full report, we won’t know the reason why he chose to spare Qo’noS.”

“I’m not sure I would have if I were in his place,” Gibson admitted. “But I’m damned glad he did. If Qo’noS had fallen the Klingons would have fought to the last man and the Romulans would have leapt in to take full advantage. Can you confirm how many Ealyian ships are returning from Klingon space?”

“We’re just now picking them up on long-range sensors and we’ve confirmed the initial reports from

the Etalyians. The entire invasion fleet, save one ship that was destroyed in a Kamikaze run that destroyed the Klingon Shipyards near Q'an'taGh, is returning.”

“An incredible feat of military planning and execution,” Gibson remarked. “What I wouldn’t give to have someone like this Prince at Starfleet. We’ll be studying his tactics during this engagement for years at the Academy, Captain, mark my words.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” Archer agreed. “Admiral, we’ve received very little information regarding the final battle at Qo’noS. How bad was it for the Klingons?”

“Archer, your Prince could have reduced the entire planet to its component atoms and there was nothing the Klingons could have done to stop him. I eagerly await your report detailing what stayed his hand. We can confirm he told the Chancellor not to send so much as a probe across the border again or he’d come back and finish what he’d started.

“The Klingons,” the Admiral continued, “appear to be taking him at his word on that account. What remains of their fleet has been ordered to steer well clear of their shared border. Any Commander who allowed his ship to get within ten kilometers of that line in space would be executed. I get the impression the Klingons want nothing more to do with the

Etalyians and High Command is more worried about the Romulans right now anyway. There is a small faction that is screaming for revenge, but their numbers are too small to be of concern. The Vulcans are sending a diplomatic mission to Qo'noS to finalize a 'peace treaty' between the Etalyians and the Klingons."

"I suppose 'stay out of our space or else' doesn't leave the Klingons much in the way of negotiating room?" Archer asked.

"No, it doesn't," Gibson agreed. "And if the Klingons know what's good for them, they won't try to bargain for anything else than 'you leave us be, we'll leave you be' for now. What is your impression of the Etalyian reaction? Will they honor Prince Bari's decision?"

"The Prince is very popular here, Admiral. This campaign has done nothing but increase that popularity. The King seems pleased with his son's decision. He'd ordered the Prince to make the Klingons pay for their crime and I think everyone can agree that he accomplished that in spades."

"And then some," Gibson agreed.

"But, like with the Klingons, there is a small faction that thinks the Prince should have finished off Qo'noS and kept going," Archer added.

“How prominent is this faction?”

“Small, sir, but it is led by the younger Prince, Francesco. It could be the younger Prince actually feels they stopped too early or...”

“We have a bad case of sibling rivalry rearing its head and threatening to ignite this conflict all over again,” Gibson finished. “That’s the last thing we need right now, some young hothead with a chip on his shoulder kicking off a galactic shooting gallery.”

Archer nodded his head in agreement.

“Captain, we’re putting together a diplomatic mission to Etalya but it’ll be a few weeks before they can get there. We want to set up a diplomatic relationship with these people. You’re going to have to serve as an ‘Ambassador-at-large’ until the diplomats can get out there and formalize things.

“Throw every ounce of weight you have behind the King and the elder Prince,” Gibson continued.

“Without ridiculing the younger Prince, make it clear that Earth’s government and Starfleet itself fully support the decisions made by Prince Bari during the Klingon campaign. Let’s keep the lid firmly on this powder keg. The longer we do, the less likely it will be that it’ll blow up in our faces. Good luck, Captain.”

“Thank you, sir,” Archer replied as the Admiral’s image faded from the *Enterprise*’s main view screen.

“Captain,” T’Pol reported after the call with the Admiral ended. “The lead Etalyian ships are expected to arrive in orbit within two hours. Prince Bari’s flagship is among them.”

“Very well, Commander,” Archer replied. “I’ll want the entire command staff ready to beam down to the surface in ninety minutes and in dress uniforms. We’ll be presenting ourselves as diplomats people, so everyone on their very best behavior planetside.”

Archer heard his crew acknowledge the order but kept his attention the forward screen showing the space near Etalya. He peered into the stars beyond as if he could see the returning fleet.

The Prince that led that fleet would be hailed as a conquering hero; this much Archer was certain of. But would he become known as more of a Julius Caesar or Genghis Kahn or would history place him in the role of a MacArthur or a Churchill?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Grand Hall on Etalya was filled to capacity. As official guests of the crown, Archer and his crew had been allowed inside but tens of thousands of other Etalyians were not so fortunate. They gathered around the palace with more arriving by the minute from every corner of the globe. It seemed all of Etalya wanted to be present for this moment in history.

They were waiting for the arrival of Prince Bari, whose shuttle was on final approach to the pad. The fleet had pulled into orbit less than two hours ago as the entire planet seemed to be talking about how it had brought the Klingons to their knees while only losing one Etalyian ship in the campaign. Clearly, all present wanted to hear how the Prince had pulled it off.

“Quite the spectacle today, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is,” Archer agreed as he turned to the source of the voice. “Mr.....?”

“Orlando Mansi,” the older man introduced himself with a slight bow. “Royal Weaponsmaster and father of Paulo Mansi, the Executive Officer aboard the *Sicilia*. At your service, Captain Archer.”

“You must be very proud of your son, especially on a day such as this.”

“Of course. I am proud of them both. The Prince and my son have been close friends almost since the cradle. I trained both of them from the time they could barely lift a sword.”

“You did well, sir. Especially in tactics.”

“Tactics? I taught them how to properly use any weapon, Captain. But in the art of tactics I feel I might have been more the student than the master when it came to the Prince.

“Even at a young age,” Mansi continued. “It was clear to us all that there was a cunning mind behind those young eyes. Our task was to see that cunning used for right and just causes. We needn’t have worried on that account. A brilliant tactician with a strong moral center, our Prince.”

“I see why he is popular with the people,” Archer remarked.

“Quite right, Captain. The people know he will always do what is right by them and by those he calls friends. Just don’t play a game of chess with him. On that field of battle he is as ruthless and without mercy as any I have ever seen.”

“So, I’ve been told,” Archer chuckled.

“I wish today was a chess game,” Mansi remarked quietly. “The stakes would only be a lost game if it were.”

“I’m not sure I follow?”

“I have told you that the Prince and my son are close friends.”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps I should have described it more as closer than brothers.”

“I have found that to be common even among my people,” Archer replied.

“Yes, but in this case there is an actual brother who resents that relationship because it is not shared with him by his own brother.”

“Francesco?”

“Yes,” Mansi sighed. “I trained him as well and watched as the two brothers grew further apart. Unfortunately, that drove Francesco to the waiting arms of the half of the Council that, quietly, opposes the Royal Family.

“Francesco has been listening to Marcus Antonius too much lately,” he continued. “Much of the strife between the Princes can be laid at Marcus’ feet. When Bari enters to give his official report to the Council, do

not be surprised to hear Francesco be critical. It will be his voice, but it will be Marcus' words."

"Can the situation be diffused?"

"I doubt it. This is a powder keg that has been waiting for its very short fuse to be lit and today may be that day. In addition to some bad advice, Francesco tends to be more, shall we say, bloodthirsty. His temper, once aroused, does not allow for cool reconsideration once action is taken. It does not surprise me that Bari would find the appropriate point to stop operations once the objective was attained. Francesco does not have that ability. The two will clash here today, Captain, mark my words."

Just then the rumble of a shuttle passing overhead shook the Hall and the cheering of the massive throng outside could be clearly heard. Only two minutes passed before the Court Chamberlain stepped inside the hall.

"You're Majesties," the old man bellowed impressively. "Members of the Council and honored guests. His Highness, Prince Bari."

The Prince swept into the room in full dress uniform and the gathered crowd broke in applause. His left hand resting casually upon his sword as made his way to the front of the Hall when the King, Queen, Prince Francesco, and the other eleven members of the

Council were seated. Bari's own Council seat was empty. As he reached a spot a few yards from the King, he stopped and knelt, head slightly bowed and the room fell swiftly into a hushed silence.

"Rise, Prince Bari," the King intoned. "All Etalya welcomes you home in gratitude for your service and that of your fleet."

"Gratitude," Francesco muttered under his breath, drawing a stern rebuke from the King.

"Perhaps we could allow your brother the courtesy of making his report before we make any judgments, my son?"

The older Mansi show Archer an "I told you so" look.

"My King, my Queen, members of the Council," Bari rose to his feet as a murmur passed through the crowd at the omission of the younger Prince. "I bring news of a great victory for our people. The Klingon responsible for the attack on our ship, the kidnapping of our Queen and the very hand that murdered Princess Gianna is dead. The Klingon fleet lies in near ruin. I daresay we may never again hear from the Klingons. While our enemy suffered great losses, we have returned home having lost only a single ship. That ship sacrificed itself to take out a major shipyard. The

Klingons will not be able to replace what they lost for decades.”

The Hall burst into another round of applause that lasted several minutes until the King finally raised a hand to bring it to an end.

“An impressive campaign indeed, my son,” the King replied. “Yet, there are some who say you did not go far enough.”

Every eye in the room looked at Francesco and then at Antonius before returning to Bari.

“Of that I have no doubt, father,” Bari replied sadly. “Let them have their say then.”

“As if that would change your mind,” Francesco pounced on the opening. “Would the entire universe tell you that you were wrong, would you admit it?”

“I’d like to think I am not that stubborn, brother,” Bari replied with a cold smile. “Or that foolish. What would you and your friend Antonius have had me do? Our mission was to punish the Klingons for what they did. Are they not punished? If the Romulans forced the issue they will be hard-pressed to fight them off with what little fleet remains to them. They will not dare test our steel again, for they have seen the price that foolishness cost them.

“Would you have had me slaughter innocents? Reduce every Klingon world to a charred cinder? And why stop there? The Romulans are little better than the Klingons. Surely if we are justified in the practice of genocide in the case of the Klingons, are we not with any species that may threaten us? Where would you have the bloodshed end, Francesco?”

“I care little about the Romulans or the rest of the galaxy,” Francesco shot back. “Your mission was to remove the Klingons as a threat to Etalya.”

“Which I accomplished.”

“Indeed? Qo’noS is not burning and the Chancellor and the High Council lives.”

“No,” Bari corrected. “They do not live.”

A collective gasp raced around the Hall.

“On our way back we intercepted a transmission,” Bari reported. “There was a coup on Qo’noS shortly after we departed. The Chancellor and the entire High Council were slain. There is a new Chancellor and Council. They have ordered all ships to stay well clear of our space. We accomplished our mission, brother, and will be considered by all outside our space to have done so within accepted bounds of warfare.

“Yes, I could have slain every Klingon and burned every world,” Bari continued. “But now that we have

made contact again with the rest of the galaxy we cannot just think of ourselves. We will be joining that galaxy now. Would you have them fear us as bloodthirsty savages? Or as a civilized people who will strive for peace but will defend ourselves when we must?"

Francesco said nothing and Bari let the silence hang in the air between them.

"That is why, brother, you will never sit on our father's throne," Bari charged and only then did the anger he felt at his brother show. "No matter how many ill-conceived alliances you form with those not fit breathe the same air as he."

"You accuse me..." Francesco sputtered, his face going crimson.

"Not just you," Bari cut him off, looking right at Antonius.

"That will be enough!" the King commanded, standing up. "The Council has heard the report of the action against the Klingons from its commander and accepts it and his reasonings for ending the campaign. It is indeed a great victory and this is a time of celebration."

"You call me unfit," Francesco growled, his hand dropping to his sword. "I call you a coward. Afraid to finish what you began and covering it in the flowery

language of ‘peace’, brother. I say it is you that has no place on our father’s throne.”

“Are you challenging me, Francesco?”

“Yes,” he snarled. “Only one of us will take the throne and it will not be you. Today, you will take your rightful place; In your grave!”

Francesco withdrew his sword and lunged.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Caught by his brother's surprise attack, Bari took a step back and to the left, dodging Francesco's initial thrust. The momentum of the attack carried Francesco beyond Bari, who took advantage of the opening with a crisp backhanded blow to his brother's head. The force of the slap drove Francesco to the marbled floor face first in an undignified heap.

"Enough, brother!" Bari barked, his sword still in its scabbard. "Would you really leave our parents with just one living child?"

"They already have only one child," Francesco wiped a smear of blood from his nose. "You are no true Forelni, traitor!"

"The only traitor here is the one whose words I hear coming from your mouth, brother," Bari replied. "You have taken in unwise counsel. I ask you once more to abandon this madness now. I have no desire to fight you."

"Good," Francesco snarled as he rose back to his feet. "It will make it all that much easier for me to kill you!"

He lunged once again but this time Bari was ready, swiftly drawing out his sword in a single smooth move that easily parried Francesco's attack. Another backhanded blow landed on Francesco's head, this one with the flat of Bari's blade just above Francesco's right ear. The younger Prince howled in pain, clapping a hand to the injured area.

"That would have been a death blow had I wished it, Francesco," Bari spoke with an eerie calm. "You are no match for me Francesco, not in this arena nor any other. I say it again, stop this madness!"

"Never!" Francesco all but screamed and lunged again.

The Princes swords clashed and clattered against each other over and over again. At times those gathered inside were hard pressed to avoid getting inadvertently caught up in the battle. Francesco never seemed to find a way through the older Prince's defenses. But time after time, the flat of Bari's blade found its mark: An ear here, a side of the face there. An exposed forearm, the small of the back. It seemed anywhere Bari wanted to strike, he did so, demonstrating with ease that if he wanted his brother dead, he could accomplish it at any time.

"Why doesn't the King stop this?" Archer tore his eyes away from the fight to look at his companion.

“Challenge was made and accepted,” Mansi replied sadly. “Even if the King overrode the rules of challenge, he would only be delaying the inevitable. I have no doubt he is relying on Bari’s skill to wear Francesco down without killing him. If Francesco yields, he can never again challenge his brother in this fashion.”

“Will he yield?”

“He is a stubborn fool, Captain,” Mansi shook his head in despair. “But even a fool must eventually realize when he is beaten.”

The battle raged on for another ten minutes, Francesco pressing the attack without result and Bari clearly fighting a defensive fight to wear down his brother and his brother’s wrath. But even with all of the training both had received, with all of the superior skill Bari possessed, one fateful misstep ended the battle in tragedy.

Fatigued and frustrated, Francesco feinted to his left, intending a quick step and slash to his right, but got his footwork all wrong and tripped over his own feet. Bari, anticipating such a move, had not taken the bait and had shifted to meet the slash. But Francesco’s blunder put his chest right in the path of Bari’s moving blade. The sharp sword penetrated the skin, slipped through the ribs and pierced Francesco’s heart.

The mortally wounded Prince, his right arm frozen in mid-sweep, looked down at the growing stain of crimson on his tunic in shock. His sword fell to the floor. His eyes drifted up until they met the horrified eyes of his brother. No one in the hall moved.

“Don’t move,” Bari commanded, his left hand settling on his brother’s shoulder, trying to ease him to the ground. “If the blade is removed you will die.”

Francesco’s right hand gripped Bari’s shoulder.

“Go to hell,” Francesco rasped and shoved Bari away as hard as he could.

Bari, fell back a few steps from the force of the shove. The sword was still in his hand as he watched Francesco crumple to the floor. He was likely dead even before the first guard came to his aid and was most certainly gone by the time the Queen reached his side.

Stunned, Bari look around until his gaze fell upon Antonius. In a flash, he crossed the short distance, grabbed the older Council member by the collar and had his sword at the man’s throat. He ignored the outburst from those assembled.

“This was your doing, Antonius,” he growled. “You murdered him as surely as if it was your own hand that drove this sword into his heart. I charge you with his murder and with treason against the crown and I find

you guilty, Antonius. It is time for you to meet your ancestors in hell.”

“No!” Antonius screamed in unison with the King’s commanding bellow.

“You object to losing your head?” Bari asked his prisoner, ignoring the King.

“I most certainly do,” Antonius squeaked out, seeing nothing but his death in the Prince’s eyes.

“Then I will give you one alternative, you poisonous snake. You resign your seat on the Council, right now, and retire to you estate. You are never again to set foot in this city or within these walls for any reason. If I see you here ever again, or if word should reach me that you were seen where you should not be, I will remove your head from your slithering body. I will have it placed on a pike and mounted at the highest point on the castle as a warning to any more of your kind. Choose now, snake.”

“Your Majesty,” Antonius gasped out as Bari was not releasing his grip. “Members of the Council, I hereby resign my seat and accept my banish...” he choked as Bari tightened his grip briefly. “...my retirement from public life.”

“Guards,” Bari commanded the two nearest men. “Take him into custody and pull back his robe.”

The guards quickly obeyed, exposing Antonius' tunic. Bari held up the blade, still wet with his brother's blood. Antonius' eyes flared wide in terror. Bari quickly wiped the blade clean, one side on each side of the exposed fabric.

"My brother's blood is on you as much as it is on me. You will carry that stain with you for the rest of your days, never taking that tunic off even to clean it else you will feel my wrath. Do you understand me, Antonius?"

The old man merely nodded his head, not daring a single word.

"Escort him out of the city," Bari ordered and the guards quickly hustled the former Council member away, probably fearing the Prince would change his mind.

The Prince walked slowly toward his fallen brother, eyes hooded, his face drawn in pain. He did not look up at his father, could not look at his mother. He brought his sword up and placed it in his left hand, his right still tightly grasping the hilt. Closing his left hand around the blade, he snapped the sword in half, the sound of it carried as if a bomb had exploded in the hall. Dropping the two halves to the floor, the Prince turned on his heel and strode out of the hall, leaving a trail of blood dripping from his hand in his wake.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Royal Palace was once again draped in the black of mourning. Prince Francesco's body lay in state in the Great Hall and would do so for three more days until the funeral. Then he would be laid to rest in the Royal Crypt next to his ancestors. There was a casket bearing the name and likeness of the Princess Gianna, but no body lay within its marble walls. Her body had been reduced to ash by the Klingons long before the Etalyian fleet had arrived over Qo'noS.

The major families would all be in attendance, save of course the Antonius'. That they were *persona non grata* would be an understatement. Gossipers at the Court wondered whom Marcus would send as his replacement on the Council. It was supposed to be done by a vote of the people of course, but in that district it was known the people voted the way they were told to.

Most settled on it being Marcellus Antonius, Marcus' eldest son. Others doubted that choice. Marcellus and Prince Bari had a dark history going back many decades. A few wondered if Marcus would go outside the family, if only to keep whoever eventually took the seat alive longer than five minutes.

There were many who doubted their Prince would allow Marcus to roam Etalya a free man for very long.

But the question on everyone's mind centered on one question: Would the Prince attend his brother's funeral at all? He'd locked himself away in his nearby dimora after the Royal Doctor had repaired his damaged left hand. In the days following the fatal fight, only his friend Paulo, the Chamberlain and a few servants had seen or even spoken to him. The King had sent a royal summons requiring Bari's presence. The summons went unanswered.

Both the Chamberlain and Paulo had been dispatched to bring the Prince back to the Palace. They returned without him less than an hour later.

"Your Majesties," the Chamberlain reported.
"He....he is..."

The older man could not finish, sadly shaking his head.

"He seems like a man fighting with demons," Paulo said softly. "Demons only he can see. And it is a fight I fear that he is losing."

* * * * *

The day of the funeral arrived. Archer and his command staff were in attendance in full dress uniform. It seemed all of Etalya had gathered here

once again to bid farewell to a Royal child. It was an hour long affair, capped by the procession to place the casket within the crypt, and had more than a trace of Roman Catholic themes to it.

No one actually saw Prince Bari during the ceremony. Many whispered of a remote figure that kept to the shadows and kept its distance. Covered in a plain black cloak and hood, no one could make out any feature of who the mysterious figure was. But it seemed most likely this had to be the Prince. When the doors to the crypt slammed shut, signaling the end of the funeral, the mysterious figure seemed to melt in the shadows and was not seen again.

* * * * *

The day after Francesco's funeral, Archer arrived at the Great Hall to take his ship's leave. The King was there to greet him.

"How is the Queen?" Archer cast a glance at her empty seat near the King's unoccupied throne.

"Still in mourning, as we all are and will be for some time."

"I was also hoping to say goodbye to the Prince."

"My son is much like my wife in matters such as these, Captain," the King sighed. "It will be of interest to see which decides to rejoin the world of the living

first. As for which of them blames him the most for what has happened...”

The King offered a slight shrug as his voice trailed off.

“And does the King also blame his son?”

“A fair question. No, Captain. The King understands what happened had to happen. The father understands and does not hold his son to any blame. The mother on the other hand?” Another sigh. “It will take time for the wounds to heal and some longer than others. But they will heal.”

“Perhaps a change of scenery for a brief time might help?” Archer was struck by a sudden idea.

“What do you mean?”

“Back on Earth,” Archer began, “we are trying to form a union, a federation of sorts, of planets in this quadrant. For mutual exploration and defense. Etalya should be a part of that effort, to show that it can wage peace as well as it can wage war when it has too.”

“And you think my son...?”

“Would make a very good Ambassador to Earth for your people. And perhaps some time away from being reminded of what happened will help him too.”

“This idea has some merit at that,” the King agreed. “Come, Captain, let us both present it to my son. Assuming he will let us past his front door.”

* * * * *

They found Bari in his gardens, staring out of the growth of flowers and bushes. An unopened bottle of wine sat on a table next to him. Another unopened bottle rested in his bandaged right hand and a clean glass sat on the top of the wall he was leaning up against.

“I am told if you open the bottle first, it is easier to consume its contents,” the King offered as they approached. The Prince did not turn to greet his visitors. He looked gaunt and pale. Rumor had it he wasn't eating much, if anything nor had he been drinking.

“This was the bottle Francesco was to present to be if I should ascend to your throne,” the Prince's voice sounded flat. “That one down there was the one I would have given him had he taken it instead.”

“And are you planning to drink them both?” the King asked.

“I was wondering if I should save them for a better day, assuming such a day would ever come. Or should I just toss them down on the walk below to smash the concrete and let the wine drain into the ground.”

“It seems a shame to waste them,” the King said softly, walking up to place a hand on his son’s forearm. “There are many better days ahead, my son, even though all you can see now is the darkness.”

Only then did Bari turn to face his father. Archer had heard the story of Paulo’s report of Bari “fighting demons” and the face he beheld was one that had indeed been in such a battle.

“And you, Captain,” Bari looked over at Archer. “Do you see better days ahead?”

“I do.”

“Perhaps he even brings one of many to you know, my son. Etalya needs an Ambassador to Earth. There is talk of a federation of worlds forming. As you said before, Etalya needs to take her place among those worlds. Who better to be her champion than you?”

“A man who slaughtered an entire race to near extinction? A man who slew his own brother? Would you send for Cain, Captain, to make peace with his cousins after he’d murdered Abel?”

“I would,” Archer replied. “When it was Abel who was the jealous brother who attacked Cain and gave him no choice but to defend himself. And you didn’t exterminate the Klingons when you easily could have done so. You stopped the bloodshed when it needed to be stopped and gave peace in this quadrant a chance.

Any man who can do that is someone we need on Earth right now.”

Bari turned away to look back over the gardens and said nothing.

“Paulo will remain as Minister of Defense,” the King added. “We will be in good hands here. You need to do this, Bari, for Etalya. But more importantly, you need to do this for you.”

Bari drew in a long breath, held it and slowly let it out. He handed his father the bottle in his hand, then picked up the other bottle and handed that one over too. The King shot his son a puzzled look.

“Keep them for me,” Bari said. “For that better day.”

The Prince turned to Archer and held out his hands.

“When do we leave?”

“Whenever you are ready, Mr. Ambassador.”

* * * * *

This marks the end of Part One of The Calling.

If you would prefer not to wait five months to read Part 2 in its entirety, you can visit my website: www.scifiscribe.com and read each new chapter of Part 2, a Star Trek: The Original Series saga every Saturday as it goes live.