

SPACEDAD STORIES

DATA'S NEW FRIEND

Book One

A Work of Fan Fiction
by Kimberly Chapman



SpaceDad Stories Book One

DATA'S NEW FRIEND

KIMBERLY CHAPMAN

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All characters and situations are entirely fictitious and any resemblance to real-world persons is coincidental.

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“It is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not a weakness; that is life.”

Jean-Luc Picard

CONTENT WARNING

The SpaceDad books stem from my daydreams over several decades, now written down as a purge of traumatic elements from my own life extended into a dramatic narrative that comforts me. I have also sought to explore more of the emotional side of the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* characters, delving into their traumas which frankly ought to be more apparent more often than the television format allows.

As such, there are a great many potential trigger issues that arise in these stories. They are meant for a mature audience capable of reading about and contemplating these often ugly facts of life.

Although I have no intention of including scenes of graphic violence, these characters have suffered graphic violence and violations to their very cores. Picard in particular has had his mind and body violated multiple times throughout *The Next Generation*, the subsequent films, and *Star Trek: Picard*. If you watched these shows and found his traumatic events to be too difficult to cope with, the SpaceDad books are likely to be even more difficult at times. Picard's daughter has endured emotional abuse, abandonment, and sexual assault, and these are the stories of them coming to terms with their pasts together.

Sensitive topics covered in this series include:

- ❖ Violence: physical, sexual, and emotional. There are battles in person and in space, and there are character deaths including major canonical deaths.
- ❖ Mental health issues: trauma and its after-effects including a wide variety of emotional scars, coping mechanisms, and psychological conditions.

❖ Disability: examinations of 24th century societal ableism in terms of both physical disability and emotional variability within a neurodivergent framework.

❖ Adult Themes: some books will include positive sex scenes and frank discussions of sexual topics.

❖ Spoilers: any aired Star Trek may be referenced at any time.

I hope you enjoy the stories, but do please proceed with caution within your own needs and boundaries.

CHAPTER ONE

Stardate 47067.3 (Sunday 01/25/2370, 13:32) – USS Enterprise
NCC-1701-D – Observation Lounge

Captain Jean-Luc Picard leaned back in his chair at what he thought was nearly the end of his senior officers' briefing. It had been a lengthy meeting, their first all together since returning from Ohniaka Three where they'd encountered Lore, Hugh, and several other Borg.

The tedium of a more usual Starfleet workload was a relief in a way, yet it remained tedious nonetheless and Picard wished to wrap it up so he could get back to preparing for other more interesting events coming up soon. "If that's everything else done, then Mr. La Forge you had something about an invitation to a specialist you wished to discuss?"

Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge nodded. "Yes Captain, I'm really excited about this one."

Commander William Riker rubbed his eyes. "This has already been very long. Do we all need to be here to discuss you bringing in new engineering staff?"

La Forge replied, "Ordinarily no, but this is a special case and I need some agreement across department heads, especially before the captain goes on leave in ten days." He grinned widely. "I am very close to getting Anna White to join us here on the Enterprise!"

Most of the rest of the assembled senior staff exchanged a questioning look.

La Forge raised his hands in exasperation. "Anna White! The warp genius behind the new core we're getting in two months!"

"As I suggested to you this morning, nobody in this room other than you and I routinely reads the journals in which she is cited," said Lieutenant Commander Data.

“Well yeah,” La Forge said, “but come on, she’s the Baltimore survivor!”

Lieutenant Worf’s omnipresent frown deepened. “What happened in Baltimore?”

“Not the Earth city,” Data clarified. “The SS Baltimore that crashed into Covaris Two.”

Picard’s blood ran cold and he sat up stiffly. “There were no survivors of the Baltimore. That was over twenty years ago.”

“Nineteen years, four months, and three to four days ago, sir, since the precise date and time of the crash is unknown.” Data clarified. “And there was indeed one survivor.”

“Captain, are you all right?” asked Counsellor Deanna Troi.

“I had...an acquaintance on the Baltimore,” Picard replied carefully. “Meredith White. Did she survive and change her name to Anna?”

“No sir,” La Forge said. “Anna is her daughter. She was just a little kid when they crashed.”

Picard shook his head. “We must be talking about different ships, different people. Children were not permitted on Starfleet duty vessels back then, let alone on a scouting mission that close to the border of Federation space.”

“There has only been one SS Baltimore sir,” Data said. “NAR-22601, Aerie class. The surviving child grew up alone on board and relaunched the ship on stardate 44330.3.”

“That’s only about three years ago,” Riker said. “It sounds familiar...”

Doctor Beverly Crusher’s eyes grew wide. “Oh I do know who you mean!”

“I’m glad someone here does,” La Forge said.

Crusher cast a dire look to Troi as she said, “The girl who was taken by Loxos, and then treated abominably by Starfleet at The Institute.”

A horrible dawning crossed Troi’s face as well. “Oh no! I’d forgotten her name but...oh dear!”

“What, is she some kind of dangerous lunatic?” Riker asked.

“Will!” Troi chastised. “That’s a terrible thing to say about the mentally ill. And no, she’s unfortunately all too sane despite being tortured repeatedly after she was found.” Troi put her head in her hands and her shoulders slumped as if it was a struggle to bear the weight of the story. “My heart broke when I first saw the reports coming through. I couldn’t stand to read them all.”

“Don’t read them,” Crusher warned. “I did at the time because of Starfleet Medical’s interest in her multiple unusual conditions. It was one of the worst things I’d ever read. I could hardly sleep for weeks after.”

“Would one of you care to explain what the hell is going on to those of us who are in the dark?” Picard demanded with more of an edge to his tone than he intended. His relationship with Meredith White had ended badly and he’d felt terribly guilty once he’d calmed down and realized he’d been partly to blame. His guilt was then renewed several years later when he’d heard that the Baltimore and its entire crew had been lost. It wasn’t that he’d ever held a torch for Meredith, but rather that he suspected she had for him, and he knew he had been unkind in their final argument. The thought that she had a child smuggled aboard was further unsettling, and dark calculations of stardates were prickling at the back of his mind.

“Sorry,” Crusher said gently. “It was major news at the time but you would have been...otherwise occupied with even bigger events.”

Riker rubbed at his eyes again, “Wait, I think I do remember this. She was found in the aftermath of Wolf-359, right?”

Picard successfully suppressed a shudder.

“Yeah,” La Forge confirmed. “That creep Loxos found her in the remnants of a ship he stole from the Wolf-359 wreckage grounds. And he...well, yeah.”

“What?” Picard asked. “He what?”

“He kept her bound in his sickbay and viciously assaulted her for weeks until she overpowered him, took over the ship, and sent

out a distress call,” Troi said softly but with each word landing like a weight in the room.

Wincing, Crusher added, “That’s one reason why she’s of interest to Starfleet Medical, because she has a very rare condition that renders her highly resistant to sedatives. He was sedating her, or so he thought, and then when she saw a chance she clobbered him and took the bridge. She was rescued by another Starfleet vessel –”

“The Fleming,” Data interjected.

“Yes, and taken back to Earth, where she ought to have been welcomed with the utmost kindness,” Crusher said.

“Instead the now-disgraced Dr. Rundell got to her and managed to stick her in his facility at The Institute for studying feral children,” Troi explained. “Where he proceeded to psychologically abuse her further until she hacked her way through the communications system to present a petition for release to Starfleet command.”

“And when that was investigated, she was finally released,” Crusher said. “Even then, they just sent her on her merry way with no support whatsoever.”

“No, there was an attempt to provide her with the counselling she should have received from the start,” Troi countered. “But she refused. She wanted nothing to do with Starfleet after all of that.”

“Can you blame her?” the Doctor asked.

“Not at all, no.”

“Right,” La Forge said, his earlier enthusiasm dampened by the uncomfortable elements to the story. “But Daystrom eventually got in touch with her and she’s done work off and on for them since, explaining her unorthodox methods in repairing the Baltimore and then further research beyond that. Turns out the kid’s a genius, and now everyone wants her attention. But she got overwhelmed so an edict was issued that none of us were allowed to send her questions anymore without going through Dr. Cortez from Daystrom. She stepped in and took care of White, keeping her from continually running off into hiding.”

“Why wouldn’t they just leave her be?” Worf asked.

“Because like I said, she’s a genius. She basically mashed the Baltimore’s non-warp shuttlepod to the aft of the remnants of the Baltimore itself, came up with a whole new system to extend the shuttlepod’s tiny little deflector using the standard shields, rebuilt the entire operating system, and blasted herself off of what had been listed as a planet too dangerous to approach. She did so many things any reasonable engineer would have called impossible that we all want to know how she did it, so everyone’s been trying to invite her to their project, their station, their ship.

“Now some of her experiments are being put to work in the next generation of warp cores. We’re one of the first two ships getting one so I’ve invited her to come here for the installation. Hopefully for even longer, if we can keep her happy, which is why I need to ask you all about it. Dr. Cortez has been letting me communicate with her directly and I think she’s willing to come, but she has a list of demands. Some of them are a bit weird, so I need some approval here.”

“It’s sad what happened to her but does that give her the right to issue unusual demands?” Riker asked.

“Chances are anything that comes across as strange is because of what she’s been through,” Troi replied. “Victims of severe trauma often put up walls in the form of difficult boundaries, almost challenging people to cross. It’s a way to test those around them to determine who will take them seriously, who is safe to be around.”

“I can guess at some of them, based on what was done to her,” Crusher added. “I imagine she still wants nothing to do with anyone from Starfleet Medical, particularly therapists of any sort.”

“Well that’s part of it,” La Forge said, referring to a list on a PADD. “She doesn’t want to ever have to enter sickbay unless it’s absolutely necessary, and she insists on never being approached by, as she puts it, ‘The Betazoid or any other mind-readers or psychologists or therapists of any kind.’” He shrugged at Troi.

“I’ve told her a few times already that you’re only half Betazoid and that you can’t read minds. She just repeats the same thing.”

“That’s fine, Geordi. I completely understand and I don’t take any offence.”

“I do,” Riker grumbled. “Again, I’m sorry she’s been through hell but that’s no reason to talk about you like that, accusing you in advance.”

Troi shook her head. “It’s not personal. She’s establishing an entirely reasonable boundary based on what she’s heard about the Enterprise crew.”

“Speaking of crew, she also wants reassurance that nobody on board has a record of sexual assault or even harassment,” La Forge continued.

“Well I should hope not,” Picard retorted.

“I do not believe so,” Worf replied. “But it is an easy matter to check.”

“Isn’t that something we check for before accepting new crew anyway?” Riker asked.

“Yes sir, for officers,” Worf confirmed. “However we do not perform a full background check on all temporary crew or guests. A conviction of that nature would be flagged for temporary crew but it would require the relevant department head to notice. It is a reasonable request. I can have that confirmation to you by this evening, with the caveat that short-term guests may not be so easily researched, and change frequently.”

“Thanks Worf. She also says she is not willing to participate in any study – casual or formal – regarding her past other than specific technological-based questions. She doesn’t even want to be asked.”

“That’s also reasonable,” Troi said. “She needs space and respect. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“She has also made specific requests in terms of quarters,” Data said. “She wishes to be as close to main engineering as possible, which is something I can readily accommodate since Lieutenant

Markey has been moved off of Deck Thirty-One, leaving Room 5334 available.”

“Markey raised a stink about that little L-type room for ages before we agreed to move him,” Riker said. “Is this woman with all of these other demands going to be okay with small quarters in one of the louder parts of the ship?”

“I believe so, sir,” Data replied. “The proximity to main engineering is tied to her other requests to be left alone, which I am certain Geordi will continue to explain in a moment. But she has told him she prefers a small space and she has requested permission to make non-standard modifications to accommodate her specific mobility needs due to her missing leg.”

“What? Missing leg?” Picard asked incredulously.

“That’s one of the other points of interest for Starfleet Medical,” Crusher replied. “She’s the youngest self-amputee on record. When the Baltimore crashed, White happened to be alone in their small sickbay with all of the adult crew on the bridge. The ship crashed nose-down nearly up to its nacelles, so the bridge and other fore compartments were crumpled back. A bulkhead was shoved back into sickbay, landing on her leg just below the knee, I believe, crushing it completely. Somehow she had the presence of mind to have the computer assist her in using tools she was able to reach to sever the remainder of the leg and stop the bleeding with a dermal regenerator.”

Picard said, “I am beginning to think this is some sort of sick joke. Are you telling me a child in the middle of a crash situation was able to successfully cut off her own leg and survive for years after with no adult help whatsoever?”

“Klingon children have been known to persevere in perilous situations on their own,” Worf said.

“She’s not a Klingon,” Riker said. “And she was really young, wasn’t she?”

“She was about five, if I recall correctly,” Crusher replied.

“That is correct, Doctor,” Data confirmed.

“I’m with the captain on how unlikely this all sounds. I remember it all coming out now but I also remember thinking a lot of it sounded highly inflated to make for a juicy holonews story,” Riker said.

But Picard barely heard him, because at the mention of the child’s age he was once again distracted by an increasingly uncomfortable calculation. He could just make out in his peripheral vision that Troi had turned to look at him, forcing him to employ all of the tricks he’d learned over the years to try to keep his feelings to himself.

“Oh it’s all too real,” Crusher replied. “Like I said, I’ve seen the file. The bulkhead did most of the work, and thankfully she’s just the sort of person with a fighting spirit enough to do the rest, I guess. It’s not as if she did a professional job, but she saved herself and then learned to live like that.”

“Indeed,” Data said. “She has subsequently refused to be fitted with a permanent prosthetic. She apparently wears a temporary one when necessary but has requested a small room where she can affix hand-holds –”

“Ogawa to Crusher,” came the alert from Crusher’s combadge. *“Lieutenant Negu’s labour has suddenly progressed.”*

“Understood and on my way,” Crusher replied as she rose from the table. “I have to go. Geordi, please assure her that the entire medical department will accommodate her needs. All she needs to ever do is ask and we’ll find a way that works for her.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

At the door she turned and added, “It’s about time someone reached a hand of real kindness for this poor girl, and if we’re supposed to be the best ship in the fleet it behooves us to be the best in terms of providing a safe place for someone who has been through more than her fair share of suffering.”

La Forge said, “Exactly. We’re the flagship. We should get her here above everyone else who wants her because we’re the best and it seems only fair to offer her the same.”

Crusher nodded and left, still looking distressed from the conversation.

La Forge continued, “Most of the rest of this is small stuff that we can easily accommodate, like a seated workstation in engineering when feasible, apparently she has a non-standard sleep cycle and doesn’t want to be held to a shift schedule, never being ‘snuck up on and touched or grabbed from behind’ which obviously nobody would do anyway, and a few other things that I can absolutely handle. Oh, and meeting you, of course, but you already know that,” he said to Data.

Data nodded. “That would be inevitable if she spends time in engineering. I am also quite interested in discussing some of her publications with her.”

“Why you specifically?” Riker asked.

“Apparently the way she figured out how to escape The Institute was to present a case for emancipation to Captain Avila in the JAG office by directly hacking through command security to dump a file right on the Avila’s terminal,” La Forge said. He looked at Picard to add, “And a major part of her case rested on your defence of Data against Maddox’s attempt to have him declared Starfleet property for the purposes of experimentation.”

“She saw herself as the victim of involuntary experimentation, so when she gained access to related Starfleet records and searched on that topic, my case came up,” Data explained.

“Well she’s not wrong,” Troi said. “Rundell was effectively experimenting on her and the other feral children. It turned into a major scandal in my circles.”

La Forge added, “Apparently she didn’t realize she already had the basic human rights Maddox was arguing Data didn’t have, so instead of just saying, ‘Hey, I don’t belong in here,’ she used the arguments from that case to prove why she shouldn’t be kept caged.”

“And now she’s reaching out for someone she perceives as a likely ally,” Troi surmised.

“I am entirely willing to serve in that regard,” Data said.

“But that brings me to the last thing, and this is the really big, really weird one,” La Forge said, referring back to the PADD. “She says she has a ‘prior issue’ with someone on board the Enterprise that she doesn’t want to have to discuss with anyone, and this is why she wants quarters near main engineering. She says this is a person ‘in a red uniform’ so she wants everyone in command to just leave her alone. She wants to be able to go from her quarters to engineering with as little interaction with anyone else on board as possible. Don’t ask me for more details than that because I had to stop asking when I could tell she’s not going to budge on this.”

“She seriously expects to never see anyone in red? A third of the personnel on board?” Riker asked incredulously.

“Command staff only comprise twenty-two-point-three percent of the current crew,” Data clarified. “Further, most of those of you wearing red spend most of your time in the saucer section. While her request is very mysterious, it is not that difficult to accommodate in a general sense.”

“Well I’m not going to stay out of engineering just because someone has an issue with someone else in command,” Riker replied. “I’ve never met her so I know I’m not the one she’s avoiding.”

La Forge shrugged. “Data and I actually thought it might be you since you argued against him in the Maddox case.”

“Because I was forced to!”

“We are all aware of that sir,” Data said. “But perhaps she is not.”

“It’s right there in the case record that Captain Louvois ordered me to argue Maddox’s side or else she’d summarily judge against you. If she studied that record –”

“I don’t see much sense in speculating with whom she has an issue without any further information,” Picard interjected in as much of a calm and cautious tone as he could muster. “Mr. La Forge, it sounds as though you have ample valid reason for trying to attract this expert aboard, and as our good Doctor said, Starfleet owes her a debt for all that she apparently continues to give even

having been treated so poorly. In regard to her other requests, you may tell her that we will do our best to accommodate her but by no means can we guarantee that she will never come face to face with command staff.”

“There’s no way we can promise that,” Riker echoed.

Picard continued, “We can, however, put out a discreet alert to command staff to simply leave this individual alone as much as possible.”

Riker shook his head. “I still don’t like it. If she’s got an issue with one person, why not just say who that is?”

“Again, it might simply be a test to see if a strange need will be taken seriously,” Troi said. “She might not actually have anyone specific in mind.”

“I get the feeling that she really just wants to be left alone for the most part,” La Forge said. “That’s why I’m also going to give her some private lab space. She seems happy to work within small engineering teams but otherwise doesn’t want to get overwhelmed.”

“It could very well be that she sees command staff as a threat and is making an excuse of a mysterious, unnamed person to justify that,” Troi surmised. “It’s not unusual to fear authority, especially for someone who has been through the sorts of things she has endured. I bet if she feels that her concerns are taken seriously, these lines she’s drawing in the sand will fade away. I also agree with Beverly that we have an opportunity to right some wrongs done by Starfleet, and there’s a moral imperative to do so to the best of our abilities.”

Picard abruptly rose and said, “Good. We leave it in your hands, Mr. La Forge. Number One, you have the bridge. I will be in my ready room.” Without another word he strode out the starboard door of the Observation Lounge.

La Forge shrugged, but then smiled at Data. “I have a good feeling about this.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Riker as he stood. “Go ahead and answer as the captain ordered, but I’m not going to walk on eggshells every time I need to come down to engineering.”

After he too had left, Troi cast a mild glare in his direction, then turned to La Forge with a smile and said, “Geordi, if you need any advice on how to word your reply let me know. I’d like to help make her life a little bit more comfortable as much as I can without having any direct interaction with her.”

“Thanks. I think I can handle it, but I might have you check it before I send it.”

“Of course. I’m here to help.”



Picard looked away from his desk terminal as the record he’d called up filled the screen. He glanced up long enough to see the photo of a clearly unhappy young woman, half expecting to recognize her immediately. When he didn’t, he turned away again, fearing to read any of it. He stood, straightened his shirt, and went to his replicator.

“Tea, Earl Grey, hot,” he ordered, but then stood staring at it sitting there on the softly glowing replicator platform. Tea made a lot of things better in Picard’s life, but he realized that even tea couldn’t fix what he feared he was about to discover. Eventually he picked up the cup by its handle slowly with his right hand, tapping the warm side with his left index finger. He took a sip, thought to himself, *Well there’s nothing for it then*, and went back to his terminal to read Starfleet’s profile of this Anna White.

He allowed himself one more brief reprieve by skipping down the file to her impressive list of technical publications, noting a theme amongst the titles; though she clearly had expertise in several areas, they mostly boiled down to doing unexpected things with mismatched technology and unusual materials.

- Schwartz, S., & White, A. (2367) Reviewing Primary Findings from The SS Baltimore. *Journal of the Institute for Unauthorized Experiments*, 42(3), 77-81.
- White, A., & McNeil, T. (2367) Alternative Protocols and Subroutines for Non-Standard Replicator Functionality in Emergency Situations. *Journal of Starfleet Technology*, 182 (4), 146-154.
- Cortez, R., Adams, E., Mcleod, P., & White, A. (2368). “Dulling The Sawblade: Alternative Materials Research into Lowering Peak Transitional Thresholds.” *Daystrom Institute Journal*, 108(2), 47–65.
- White, A., Bendis, M., & Miller, R.X. (2368) “Shield Displacement Strategies for Deflector Compensation.” *Journal of Starfleet Technology*, 183 (3), 102-135.
- Schwartz, S., Huang, L., & White, A. (2368) “Analysis of Non-Standard Materials in Warp Field Generation on SS Baltimore.” *Journal of the Institute for Unauthorized Experiments*, 43(2), 35-39.
- Huang, L., Cortez, R., Mcleod, P., & White, A. (2368) “New Applications for Trellium Derivatives.” *Starfleet Materials Research Quarterly*, 92(3), 102-105.
- White, A., & Russell, S.. (2368) “Atypical Bulkhead Hybridization Techniques.” *Cambridge Journal of Materials Science & Metallurgy*, 191 (6), 412-451.
- Adams, E., Cortez, R., & White, A. (2369). “Non-Standard Warp Field Generation Methodologies.” *Journal of the Cochrane Institute*, 210(2), 173-175.
- Kiyohira, S., Cortez, R., Mcleod, P., & White, A. (2369) “Interphasic Fusion in the Construction of Warp Plasma Conduits.” *Daystrom Institute Journal*, 109(2) 83-97.
- Schwartz, S. (2369) “Using What You Have – Profile Interview with Anna White of The SS Baltimore.”

Journal of the Institute for Unauthorized Experiments,
44(2), 104-105.

Cortez, R., Mcleod, P., & White, A. (2369)

“Improvements in Dispersion-Strengthened Wozmium
Carbmolybdenide Application in Matter Reactant
Injectors.” *Daystrom Institute Journal*, 109(4) 83-97.

But all the while he felt the pull of his attention upwards to the listed birth information, and with another sip of his tea, he finally gave in and looked.

Anna White

Species: Human

Gender: Female (she/her)

Affiliation: Daystrom Institute, Materials Research Division

Rank: Specialist

Occupation: Consultant – see Contact

Status: Varies – see Contact

Born: 22368.4 / 15 05 2345, Starfleet Medical Academy, San Francisco, California, USA, Earth

Mother: Meredith White

Father: unknown, DNA automatch refused by mother on 22368.6

Other Living Relatives: unknown

Marital Status: single

Current residence: #302 18 Mill Road, Howlett End, GB

Contact: Restricted, via Daystrom Institute only (Dr. Raihana Cortez) effective 46124.6 / 15 02 2369

Picard closed his eyes and tried to calculate the time difference between the last time he'd been with Meredith and the listed birthdate. “Computer, access my personal log files referencing Meredith White and display stardates of all entries.”

The computer replied, “Accessing personal log database,” and a moment later showed him a list. He knew the outlying later ones

were his records of remorse at having handled the breakup badly and his subsequent mention of Meredith when he first heard about the loss of the *Baltimore*, but the dates that stuck out to him were 21627.3 and 21707.2. Those framed the month the *Stargazer* underwent significant repairs after what he now considered a ridiculously maverick mission chasing down pirates through the asteroid belt on the edge of the Bilana system. They'd caught the pirates but sustained heavy damage, necessitating a return to Earth for several weeks.

He'd intended to break things off with Meredith upon his arrival back on Earth, already sensing their seven-month romance was fracturing due to different long-term expectations, mostly insofar as he'd had none and she'd clearly developed several. Her messages to him had become increasingly needy, and he'd thought it best to call the whole thing off once he saw her. But then she'd met him at his temporary Starfleet accommodations in that perky little blue dress that matched her eyes, grinning ear to ear for knowing the effect it would have on him that evening. It had worked, and when she'd left his quarters the next afternoon he'd recorded that 21627.3 log.

Now, twenty-six years later, he sighed and tapped the record to play the entry, shaking his head at his younger self, still with hair, still with such arrogant swagger.

"Personal log, Jean-Luc Picard, stardate 21627.3," his old self started, then laughed, looking away from the camera. *"Oh, she's done it to me again. Meredith, why can't I shake you? Nights like that can make a man agree to almost anything."* He wagged his finger in the air. *"But I didn't agree. I didn't. I know what she wants and it's just not going to happen. She can twist me six ways from Sunday but I'm not going to propose. I can't be a married man. I don't have time for that nonsense. And anyway, she's stationed here at HQ. These last few months of hurried visits here and there were a lot of fun at first but it's getting tedious. Cumbersome."* He shook his head slowly. *"No, I am not getting trapped in this."* He laughed again. *"But oh she's getting under my*

skin, isn't she? Not to mention all over my skin," he said with a flirtatious grin into the camera.

The elder Picard winced at his younger self's crassness.

"I don't know what I'm going to do. We're going to be here for at least a month. Do I end it now and have to listen to her complain about it the whole time, or do I keep us both entertained until it's time to go?" He groaned and leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. *"Seems to me we all benefit if I play along a bit more, I suppose. Then again that risks letting her get her hooks in deeper. I guess I'll just have to see how it goes."* He grinned again at the camera and ended the log.

Sitting in his ready room in 2370, Picard sighed, knowing exactly how it had gone and not wanting to review the 21707.2 log he recalled recording in fury just after their final argument. He knew he'd used incredibly inappropriate language to Meredith in person and then later in the log as well.

He'd been a few days away from taking the Stargazer back out and figuring out how to end things with Meredith when she shifted from hinting about marriage to outright insisting it was about to happen. All of a sudden she was talking about joining him on the Stargazer as his wife and starting a family. He'd reacted poorly, accusing her of insanity, of trying to trap and control him, of manipulating him, of all sorts of terrible things. She'd been so oddly adamant about having children – something she'd never mentioned before – and now his blood ran cold as he remembered what she'd said and how she'd stood as she said it, with her hands over her belly. He'd told her under no circumstances did he ever want to have children, least of all with her. When she cried and shouted that he was the love of her life, he'd viciously replied, "Well you're not the love of mine." He remembered how pale she'd gone before she stumbled out of the room. That was the last time he ever saw her.

The day before the Stargazer left, she sent him a message begging to talk to him again, but he never replied, and the guilt of that along with his unnecessarily cruel words and realizing he'd

lead her on had haunted him when he heard about the Baltimore's unhappy end with her aboard.

But never before this day had he thought about what she might have actually been trying to tell him. He looked at the dates again: mid-August 2344, then mid-September. In May the next year Meredith had given birth to a daughter and not even bothered to tell him.

Picard counted the months, then leaned forward with his head in his hands, muttering under his breath, "Oh Meredith, what have you done?"

He felt dizzy and a little nauseated. He'd always been sure to get his annual birth control shot, but he knew full well efficacy was never one hundred percent and only close to it if both partners had had it. Had she skipped it? Was this deliberate? Had she meant to trap him or was it an accident?

These questions were swirling in his mind when there was a chime at his door. He briefly considered ignoring it, but everyone on the bridge knew he was there. He turned off his screen and barked, "Come."

Troi entered, crossed her arms, waited for him to say something, and then sat down in front of him when he remained silent. "Captain," she said, "I can tell you're upset about something even from out there on the bridge."

"I'm not sure I wish to discuss it at this time."

"Are you asking me to leave?"

They stared each other down for a moment before Picard sighed, looked away, and muttered, "Would there be any point?"

"Captain, if you truly wished me to leave, I'd go. But we always go through this and you always feel better after you've confided in me. Or if not me, I'll send Will in here and —"

"No, please, no," Picard said. "I may be mistaken, but I have an awful feeling I've unwittingly been party to a terrible injustice, and I wish very much to wake up now and find this is all a ridiculous nightmare."

"This has to do with Anna White?"

“Mm.”

“You mentioned you knew her mother. Is that the problem? Do you feel responsible for the child of an old friend?”

Picard sat back, unable to look Troi in the eye. “Meredith was more than a friend.”

“Oh, I see,” Troi said, but then her eyes grew wide. “Oh no, Captain!”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” he said, rising to his feet and looking out his narrow window into the endless sea of stars. “It’s all conjecture.”

“You think you’re this girl’s father?!”

“I don’t know!” he snapped. “I’ve never heard of her before today!”

Troi rose and came to his side, hands out in placation. “All right, let’s just think this through. When were you –”

“I’ve just been through my logs and her file and the dates match.”

“Okay. How exclusive were you and –”

“Meredith begged me to start a family. I soundly rejected the idea and we broke up over it, but partly because I was already finding her to be too...clingy. It’s unlikely that she would have been with someone else at the same time. Anything is possible, of course, but...” He sighed again, shook his head, and then whispered, “I swear I had no idea there even might’ve been a child. It never even occurred to me.”

“She’s never tried to contact you? Anna, I mean?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Computer, search all of my incoming messages for anything from anyone named Anna White.”

The computer replied, “Searching,” and then a moment later said, “No messages within stated parameters.”

“I could just be wildly speculating,” Picard said.

“Or perhaps she herself doesn’t know.”

“Her record lists no known father and Meredith appears to have rejected the automatic matching system.”

“Oh dear.”

“What?”

Troi shrugged. “Well if I’d been spurned by my lover and the child I was carrying had been ‘soundly rejected’ as you say, I might just well be angry enough to minimize the chance said lover could ever come into my child’s life by blocking the medical systems from matching him in the first place.”

“Then again, Meredith could have been blocking some other man for some other reason,” Picard said.

“You don’t believe that, though.”

“No. No I don’t.” He sunk back into his chair and muttered, “Damn.”

Troi returned to the other chair as well. “We should bring Beverly in on this.”

Picard looked aghast. “Absolutely not!”

“Why not? She can advise us on whether or not she can match you now.”

“I’m fairly certain since this Anna person is an adult she’d have to consent to any DNA matching herself at this point, and the last thing I want right now is to let this potential scandal out of the bag, especially on mere supposition!”

“It’s not very much of a scandal, is it? You wouldn’t be the first man to find out he’d unknowingly fathered a child.”

“It’s unbecoming to an officer of my rank.”

“You were perfectly supportive when Worf learned that he was Alexander’s father.”

“That’s different.”

“Why, because you’re the Captain?”

“Damned right! I’m supposed to set an example with my behaviour!”

“So set an example and reach out to this young woman to see what she may need from you.”

“I should think that’s a little late! Why else would she issue an edict that command staff leave her alone?”

“As we discussed in the meeting, there could be many reasons for that.”

Picard laughed bitterly. “Oh no. No, no, no, no. If it’s true, or even if she thinks it’s true, if Meredith thought it was true, can you imagine how much she must despise me? A child, all alone in such dire straits, no doubt crying to the heavens day after day for rescue only to be unanswered for nearly two decades? If she has any inkling that she’s my daughter she must see me in a horrible light indeed. I can’t say in good conscience that I’m particularly impressed with myself at the moment.”

“All right, then what do you propose to do about it?”

He shook his head. “I haven’t the foggiest notion of where to start. She seems to keep telling the world, ‘Leave me be,’ so who the hell am I to come knocking at her door and say, ‘Hello, I might be your father!’? And what if I’m wrong? What a palaver that’d be. There’s frankly not much I can do at the moment.”

“You’re going to have to figure something out once she comes aboard, assuming Geordi is successful in convincing her.”

“He didn’t say when, did he?”

“No, but it must be before this new warp drive is installed. We’re due at Starbase 58 in about three weeks, which would be a sensible route for her to get on board and a reasonable time frame. That’s not much time.”

“Well she won’t be here before we have this cultural exchange coming up with the Iyaarans in four days’ time. Perhaps after I’m back from Iyar we’ll have more information, or my head will have stopped spinning, or something.”

“I still think you should tell Beverly.”

“No!”

“Captain, if you have a possible genetic link to someone coming on board, your Chief Medical Officer needs to be aware of that.”

Picard lifted his hands defensively. “Perhaps, but not now, not today. Deanna, I need some time to think about all of this. Please, I know you’re trying to help, but I’m not ready to seek help yet, not from you or Beverly. Can we please just keep this to ourselves for now, at least until after the cultural exchange?”

“Fine. But you can’t just bury this and hope it works out later. You do need to be prepared for a variety of contingencies before she comes on board.”

“I know. I’ll consider such things later.”

“*Captain,*” came Worf’s voice over the comm. “*You have an incoming subspace communication from Admiral Nechayev.*”

“Understood Mr. Worf. Patch her through,” Picard replied. He raised his eyebrows at Troi and muttered, “It appears to be my lucky day.”

Troi smiled encouragingly at him as she stood and left.

Picard glanced at the now-cold remnants of tea in the cup on his desk and longed for something considerably stronger before having to speak with Nechayev, but nonetheless straightened his shirt, put on his best diplomatic smile, tapped his terminal and said, “Good afternoon, Admiral, what can I do for you?”



Stardate 47083.6 (Saturday 01/31/2370, 12:20) – Shuttlebay Two

Six days later, Picard maintained yet another diplomatic smile as the three Iyaaran ambassadors boarded their vessel and left the Enterprise. However, as soon as they’d cleared the bay he let the facade slip away.

Troi asked, “Are you all right, Captain?”

“I suppose so. That was a fascinating experience, but not one I care to repeat. How did you find your ambassadors?”

Troi grimaced. “I won’t be able to look at chocolate for a week.”

“Good heavens.”

“Don’t let her fool you,” Riker said with a laugh. “She got the easy one. It’s our poor Mr. Worf here who needs recovery.”

“I am fine,” Worf grumbled.

“You just said your experience was ‘excruciating’!” Riker said.

“I am fine with ‘excruciating’,” Worf replied. Then he turned to Picard. “Request permission to...recuperate. Sir.”

“By all means, Mr. Worf.”

Worf nodded and left, limping slightly and still clutching his arm to his side.

Picard’s brows lifted as Riker said, “I think he made a new friend.”

“Oh hush, Will,” Troi said. “You’re lucky ambassador Byleth didn’t stick with you after all. If seeking to antagonize was his goal, he’d have found your buttons easily enough.”

“Me?” Riker asked with exaggerated innocence. “I’m as cool as a cucumber!”

“A nice, healthy cucumber salad sounds about perfect right now,” Troi said tiredly as the three headed to the door.

“Voval told me in the end that Byleth sought to experience antagonism and Loquel sought pleasure,” Picard said. “Am I to understand they succeeded in these goals?”

“Ambassador Loquel certainly learned the pleasure of dessert, yes, and the less said about how far Byleth pushed Worf the better,” Troi explained. “How was your meeting with the first minister?”

“We never got there,” Picard said.

“Why not?” Riker asked.

“It was all a ruse. Voval simulated a crash and used a holographic projection device to trick me into thinking he was a human woman trapped in the remains of a Terellian freighter she alleged crashed there seven years ago. It was all a simulation designed to experience love.”

“Love?” Troi asked incredulously. “But you were only gone a short time!”

“Precisely,” Picard said. “Voval realized he’d failed in his quest when I explained to him that human love is more complicated than

putting two people in a room together and waiting for sparks to start.”

“So you didn’t fall in love, then?” Riker asked with a barely contained grin.

Picard gave him a mild glare in response, and then continued, “As I said, fascinating but hardly a good time.” They entered a turbolift, Picard called out, “Bridge,” and they began to hurtle through the ship.

“Even if I did have a good time, it’s worn me out,” Troi said.

“Indeed, Counsellor. I intend to record my logs on the matter and then call it an early day. You ought to do likewise.”

They stepped out onto the bridge where Riker took command as Picard went into his ready room with Troi close behind. He turned to her as the door closed behind her and asked, “Was there something else you wanted?”

“We do still need to discuss that other matter.”

Picard dropped his bag on the small sofa and began to cross the room. “Hm? What other matter?”

“Your potential parenthood?”

Picard stopped short of reaching the replicator. “Counsellor, I have just spent the better part of two days aboard a crashed freighter with a young woman named Anna who claimed to be in love with me. The very last last thing I wish to contemplate now is whether I do indeed have a daughter named Anna who also lived for many years on a crashed ship on a barely habitable planet.” He turned towards the replicator, ordered his tea, took it, and went to his desk. “When I discovered I was being duped by Voval I briefly wondered if the Iyaarans possessed some sort of psychic powers and had pulled the name right out of my own head.”

Troi continued to look at him expectantly.

He took another sip. “The fact is there’s no evidence I am any relation to her at all.”

“That’s not how you felt a week ago.”

“A week ago I was in shock at a terrible tale involving a former lover’s child. I’ve had plenty of time in these last two days stuck

on that freighter to consider the whole matter, and the more I thought about it the more I realized that I was on the Stargazer for much of my relationship with Meredith. She had ample time to dally about with as many other lovers as she liked while I wasn't around."

"You implied that was unlikely given her feelings for you."

Picard set his tea down roughly on the desk. "Yes well the whole bloody business is unlikely, isn't it? This girl has had several years to get in touch if she thinks I'm her father, and yet she hasn't, so it's just as likely that she is either unaware or knows of some other father or doesn't care one way or the other."

Troi sat down opposite him. "You're frustrated by the uncertainty."

"Damned right I'm frustrated! It's all wild speculation I can't do anything about, so why torture myself with it? All I want to do now is complete my logs from our encounter with the Iyaaran, get some rest, and then finally get ready for my trip to Dessica Two. I've been planning this trip to the ruins of Nafir for nearly a year now so I'm not going to let a decades-old argument with a dead woman cloud my mind and dampen my spirits."

"You're still going to Dessica? Are you planning to return early, then?"

"What for?"

"You were originally scheduled to return after our stop at Starbase 58 but I talked to Geordi yesterday and he said he's confirmed White will come aboard when we're there."

"And?"

"Well don't you want to be here?"

"Why? Even if I was aboard, I'm hardly going to greet her, am I? If I'm away then so much the better for her then to have one less officer in red to fret about. And speaking of, I've given a lot of thought to that and I'm increasingly convinced it's Will she's angry at for arguing against Data's rights. Given that she read that case while searching for evidence to emancipate herself, his arguing

against must've come across as exceedingly unfair regardless of him being forced to do it."

Troi scrutinized him. "You don't believe that."

"What I believe right now is that I'm exhausted, I want to drink my tea in peace, do my job, and cease considering wild possibilities about the ancestry of someone I've never even met and am unlikely to meet by her own stipulation."

"So you'd rather consider the ancestry of the Romulan settlement at Nafir?"

"Precisely," he said, leaning back in his chair and sipping his tea at her.

"Well then, I'll leave you to your tea and we can re-examine the issue when you're back from your archaeological holiday."

"If you wish."

Troi pressed her lips together, rose, and left.

Picard let out a triumphant little, "Hmph," and began recording his log of his encounter with the Iyaaran.

CHAPTER TWO

Stardate 47118.9 (Friday 02/13/2370, 09:33) – Deck Six –
Transporter Room Three

“I’ve got a good feeling about this,” La Forge said, clapping his hands together and grinning widely as he and Data entered the transporter room.

“That is the third time you have said that in the last thirty-seven hours,” Data pointed out.

“It’s still true!” La Forge looked to the crewman at the console. “Are we ready?”

“Not quite yet, sir. There are four people coming aboard and one has not yet reported to the departure point on the Starbase side.”

“I hope that’s not our guest,” La Forge muttered to Data.

“There is insufficient information to speculate.” Data watched his friend perform several physical acts of impatience: crossing and uncrossing his arms, looking around the room idly, sighing, and putting his hands on his hips. “Does moving about frequently help to alleviate your unease at the delay?”

La Forge frowned in confusion for a moment, then laughed a little. “No, not really, Data. I guess I’m just a bit nervous that something will go wrong. After all of my work to –”

“Pardon me sir, but they’re ready now,” said the crewman.

“Then go ahead,” La Forge replied.

The familiar glow of transporters in action took over the elevated pad. Mere seconds later four people stood upon it: two of the Enterprise’s regular crew returning from distant travels, a new addition to the terraforming crew they’d be taking to Doraf Prime in the next few days, and another unfamiliar face at the back, almost hiding for a moment while the three uniformed officers

quickly stepped down and left the room with polite nods to La Forge and Data as they passed.

That fourth person was a short, pale young woman with brown hair in two French braids that terminated in little rolled buns at the back of her head. Data noticed the right one had become partially uncoiled, and he also immediately noticed her otherwise typical gold engineering specialist coveralls were a poor fit for her; baggy in the shoulders with rolled cuffs both at the ankles and wrists. Instead of standard black boots or shoes, she wore strange metallic grey shoes that looked almost like socks with a barely discernible sole.

Both Data and La Forge also noticed her obvious limp as she tentatively approached them. She bent her knees in a sort of mini curtsy. “How do you do? I’m Anna White. I know who you both are, Mr. La Forge, Mr. Data.”

“It’s great to meet you,” La Forge said.

She smiled nervously and then rapidly blurted, “I’m sorry we’re all late. The one in blue came running in at the last minute. I’ve been there for hours! Why, I couldn’t sleep a wink, I’ve been so nervous and excited and...” She turned to look up at Data, her smile flickering between enormous and restrained, as if she was trying to cover up her own excitement but intermittently failing. “I’m sorry. I’m babbling already. I can’t help it. The whole way to the Starbase I was rehearsing a million different versions of this conversation and nothing was right and even if it was now that I’m here I can’t remember a word of any of it other than to say I’m really excited to meet you. Both of you,” she quickly clarified, briefly looking at La Forge but then turning her eyes back up to Data. “Because I really think you and I have an enormous amount in common. I’ve read all about you and I kept thinking over and over again how much I just want to be your friend.”

A moment of awkward silence hung in the air, but then she broke it by exclaiming, “Oh no, I’ve blurted it out and it sounds really weird. I’m wrecking all of it already and all I meant to do was tell you that I hope we can be friends. I mean both of you, as

friends, with me, because it's a back and forth thing, because you can't just have it one way, but with each of you, oh Jiminy Crickets I sound like an idiot." A look of desperate horror replaced the smile and her whole body began to cringe.

"Hey, it's fine," La Forge said reassuringly, though it did little apparent good.

But when Data said, "Friendship is always welcome," she looked as if he had just thrown her a lifeline; a much calmer smile took over her face, spreading out in infectious joy such that La Forge found himself doing likewise. Data's expression remained unchanged.

"Thank you," she said at a much slower pace. "I'm never good at these sorts of things. That's why I wasn't sure if I should wait for that late person or not or ask to come over on my own because memorizing technical specs is easy but Starfleet policies are weird and contradictory all over the place. People stuff is weird stuff."

"Spoken like a true engineer! For what it's worth, you can come and go without having to wait for others to transport over." La Forge pointed to the small duffel she was carrying and asked, "Do you have more luggage back on the Starbase?"

She shook her head. "This is everything I own."

"If you require new coveralls, our replicators can provide whatever size you require," Data said.

Anna looked down at her baggy sleeves. "Oh this? This is deliberate. I don't like restrictive clothing and snug cuffs bug me. Plus I've altered the standard replicator pattern to add extra pockets to keep my hands free so I can get around more easily. And these," she said as she lifted up her right foot, "I promise they're beyond requirements for safety in an engineering environment, but they let me balance and move around the way I need to. Which isn't normal. I should warn you about that. I've found humans tend to think in very eye-level, horizontal ways but I'm more vertically inclined. Also it's not like this foot needs protection anyway," she said with an awkward little laugh and shake of her right leg.

“Don’t worry about it,” La Forge said. “Anyway we shouldn’t stand here in this room all day. Come on, let us take you down to your quarters.”

She nodded enthusiastically, but as soon as they approached the transporter room doors her whole posture changed once again; this time defensively, scanning around as if she anticipated a threat in the corridor beyond. When there was nobody there, she straightened up again but continued looking at everything.

La Forge and Data exchanged a curious expression as they directed her towards the nearest turbolift. As they entered, Data said, “We have assigned you to Deck Thirty-One, Room 5334. I believe it will meet your specifications.”

La Forge called out, “Deck Thirty-One, section four-two,” and the turbolift car began to move.

Anna spread her hands in front of herself as if she had an invisible screen there and was swiping between pages, prompting the two men to once again look at each other in bafflement. “Oh yes, by the ballast core. That’ll do nicely, thank you,” she said as she squeezed her hands shut for a moment as if she was closing this imaginary screen. She once again looked around as if trying to observe every detail of the ship. “Dr. Cortez was right. This ship is huge.”

“Yeah, even if you know the specs, forty-two decks can suddenly seem like a lot more than it looks on a PADD,” La Forge replied.

“It was the Galaxy class’ hugeness that convinced me to answer your initial request. Dr. Cortez said it was more like being in a city in space than in a scary little tin can, so it’s easier to keep social engagements limited.”

“Definitely. I’m pretty sure Data’s the only person on board who knows everyone else’s name.”

Data’s head tilted briefly, but then he nodded.

“Dr. Cortez also said your arboretum has real grass in it.”

“Indeed,” Data replied. “It is open almost all of the time to anyone on board at their leisure, should you wish to visit.”

She smiled up at him again. “That’s good to know, thank you. I will probably hide out in the lower decks mostly, but real grass is a serious temptation. I used to dream of it when I was on the Baltimore and it was the hardest thing to say goodbye to leaving Earth to come here.”

When the turbolift doors opened, she once again checked the corridor suspiciously, as if she expected someone unpleasant to jump out at her. La Forge stepped around her and pointed to a door opposite the turbolift stop. “Here we are, 5334. Some of us were worried it wasn’t enough for a guest of your eminence, but –”

“Eminence? Geez Louise, nobody’s ever used that grand a word for me before! Besides,” and then she began to quietly sing, “*all I want is a room somewhere, far away from the cold night air, with one enormous chair, oh wouldn’t it be –*” she paused as the quarters opened before her and then finished in a whisper, “*Loverly.*”

As all three stepped inside, she turned around to take it all in, grinning in particular at the heavy beam bisecting the quarters along the ceiling. “Why, that’s perfect, thank you!”

“It should provide ample support for the hand-holds you said you wished to add,” Data said.

“I can’t tell you how much that means to me!” She dropped her bag on the table and peered into the head. “A water shower! Oh, I didn’t suppose you’d grant me that request too!”

“It was no problem at all,” La Forge said. “Several people on board have them.”

“I know, but that was me seeing how far I could push things, if I’m honest. I fell in love with water showers after I first fled Starfleet on Earth because I’d never had one before and usually I’m terrified of being in the water but it turns out I love the rain, and a shower is like rain and not a big scary ocean or anything.” She poked her head into the bedroom. “This is really all perfect. I mean it. Thank you both so very much.”

“You are most welcome,” Data replied.

“And there’s more. If you’d like to come back out to the corridor, Specialist White,” La Forge said approaching the door.

“Wait, you don’t actually have to call me that all the time, do you?”

He paused, then awkwardly asked, “Is there a problem with that?”

“Well it’s just not me. Nobody’s used my last name for most of my life, and I don’t really care about Starfleet’s label of me as ‘specialist’. If I’m busy thinking or doing and someone calls out, ‘Attention Specialist White!’ it’s not even going to occur to me to answer because that’s not how I label myself in my head. Would it be a huge breach of protocol to simply call me Anna?”

“I guess not,” La Forge said. “Most of us in engineering go by first names anyway. It’s the command types that care more about titles. We engineers care about getting things done and it’s more efficient to say, ‘Hey Reg, hand me that hyper spanner!’ than say out a full name and title. So sure, if you’re happy with Anna, that works for me. And you can feel free to call me Geordi.”

“You may dispense with my title as well,” Data said.

“That’s a huge relief, thank you both again. This is all going so much better than I worried about.” Her smile faded a bit as she added, “But of course that makes me worry that there’s some terrible thing about to happen to punish me for letting my guard down.”

“Hopefully not,” Geordi said with a smile. “Come on, I’m hoping I have more things to show you that will make you happier still.”

Back out in the corridor, Geordi pointed to the turbolift doors opposite her quarters. “As you’ve just seen, you’ve got a turbolift stop right off your doorstep so that should minimize interaction for you, and if you don’t want to risk ending up in a lift car with anyone else, just follow this corridor straight ahead and that wall up there is the side of one of the two main vertical Jefferies tubes that go right down to main engineering. They’re escape routes so they’re always open, but the branch points at each deck do require clearance. I’d prefer to give you a combadge but technically you’re a guest, not crew, so security protocols mean I can’t do that unless

you decide to stay on permanently.” He grinned at her and added, “And I’m going to admit to you right up front that I’m hoping you like it here enough to consider that, even after we’ve got the new core installed.”

“That’s um...that’s very kind of you. Thank you.”

“Now don’t worry about the clearance side of things because I’m going to set up codes for you so you can get wherever you need to go in the tubes. It’s just that those codes are linked to me so if anything goes wrong, I’m responsible.”

“Oh dear! I’ll do my best not to cause any trouble.”

“I know. I’m not worried. And I’m sure you know how to use a standard comm panel,” he said, pointing to the one running along the corridor wall. “Pretty much anywhere in the ship you can contact Data or I whenever you need to. Most guests don’t get access to senior staff because frankly half the point of not handing out combadges to every visitor is to make sure certain VIPs we quietly refer to as ‘Very Irritating People’ can’t bug the captain every five seconds, but I’ve already given you full clearance to call Data or I at any time. And of course you can contact anyone else who isn’t senior staff or otherwise restricted as needed, plus you can always call for medical assistance or security assistance.”

“Got it,” she said.

“I know you said you want to keep down this end of the ship and that’s fine, but you’re more than welcome to make use of the ship’s recreational facilities up in the saucer section any time you want.”

Data clarified, “Some facilities such as the holodecks experience peak busy periods during which bookings are required, but most facilities are open for general use. If you wish for a tour, either of us would be happy to perform that function.”

“Thanks. I might take you up on that someday, but for now it’s a bit overwhelming.”

“I figured you might feel that way, and like I said, I’m on a mission to make you want to stay, so we’ve set up something for you over here that I’m hoping you’ll really like,” Geordi said as he

approached the next door down the corridor. It opened for him and he gestured for them to all enter.

Inside was an engineering lab with a large worktable surrounded by four chairs in the centre of the room. To the aft was a console and screen that nearly covered that entire wall. To the fore was a row of cabinets with a utility sink beside a replicator unit.

“This is now your lab,” Geordi explained. “Obviously I’m hoping you’ll work with us down in main engineering as much as possible, but I wanted you to also have your own space where you can work your special brand of magic with the amazing stuff you come up with. That’s a standard food replicator, but it can do small tools and objects as well, and if you need anything bigger we’ll show you where the manufacturing replicators are. I hope this doesn’t sound presumptuous, but I got the feeling from our communications that sometimes you might want to escape the busy atmosphere of main engineering. So whatever you need, whenever you need it, you can bring it up here where nobody will bother you.”

Anna looked around, wide-eyed, her hands over her cheeks. Her eyes welled up with tears.

“Are you all right?” Data asked.

She nodded and said in a quiet, trembling voice, “This is absolutely the most amazing thing anyone has ever done for me. I feel like any second I’m going to wake up and still be on the transport to Starbase 58 and I’ll be so sad this isn’t real. It’s the very best thing ever.” She shook her head slowly. “Why would you be this kind? I haven’t even done anything to earn it yet.”

“I do not believe true kindness can be earned,” Data replied. “It is my understanding that the very nature of kindness is that it is given without requirement.”

“Yeah, Data’s right. We want you to be happy here, not just merely accommodated. We want you to feel welcome. Hasn’t anyone ever simply been nice to you before?” Geordi asked with a

laugh, but it trailed off as he realized by her expression that it was possible nobody had.

Anna shrugged. “Dr. Cortez was nice enough, I suppose, but she kind of had to be. I was a ‘valuable asset’ and I kept running away, so she got good at giving me enough of what I needed to keep me around. But no, nobody’s ever...” she waved her hands around the lab as if she was pointing out something monumental.

Geordi and Data exchanged a look of concern as she turned away from them. Data took a step towards her and said, “I have also observed different behaviours between those who see me as a useful machine versus those who see me as a person. I have learned to appreciate the latter actions as indicators of respect.”

“I suppose that’s what this is, isn’t it?” she asked. “Respect? Not just for what I can do but...for me?”

“Of course it is,” Geordi said. “And if you’re not used to it, then it’s about damned time you got more of it.”

She looked at each of them in turn as she said, “Suddenly the words ‘thank you’ seem so small. I haven’t even been here an hour yet and you’ve both made me feel more welcome than anywhere I’ve ever been before.” She laughed nervously and wiped her cheeks. “You must think I’m very silly.”

“Not at all,” Geordi said. “I’m glad you’re happy.”

She softly sang, “*I think I’m gonna like it here.*”

“I hope so,” Geordi said. “Anyway, you’ve had a long trip so if you want to just hang out up here and get some rest, we’ll leave you to it. But if you’re keen to see main engineering —”

“Oh yes please! I’m knocked a bit sideways by all of this but I’m dying to see the core.”

Geordi gestured towards the door and they ventured forth.



When the three of them arrived in main engineering, Anna's face lit up once again and she put her hands over her chest in utter delight. "Why, she has the most beautiful heart, doesn't she?"

"She does indeed," Geordi said proudly as they walked up to the warp core. The pulsating glow was steady at a medium speed, indicating that they were already traveling away from the space station at warp. The moving rings of blue light reflected on their faces as they stood by the railing, Anna in the middle, gazing at the intermix chamber and matter injection assembly that stretched up into the decks above.

"Hello gorgeous," Anna said. "Aren't you just the prettiest thing? We're going to give you a bit of a makeover but don't you worry, it's going to be easy peasy and then you're going to be the belle of the ball."

"Damn right," Geordi said, thrilled to have someone else get as excited about the warp drive as he did on a daily basis.

Anna softly sang again, barely discernible over the engine's thrum, "*And you'll serenade Venus, you'll serenade Mars, and you'll burn with the fire of ten million stars. And in time, and in time, we will all be stars.*"

"That was lovely," Data said.

"Hm? Oh did I do that out loud? Sorry. I think in song most of the time but I try not to inflict it too much on others. Can't help myself when she's singing to us, though."

"Wait, you hear music coming from the drive?" Geordi asked.

She turned to him. "Don't you?"

"Uh...no?"

"You must listen with more than your ears. You must listen with your heart. I bet she sings you love songs when you're not even paying attention!"

"Well that'd be the story of my life," Geordi said with a sigh.

Data's brow furrowed. "I detect a steady rhythm but no melody. Do you believe you hear music right now other than the song you sang yourself?"

“There’s always music playing in my head. Sometimes a whole bunch of songs overlapping each other. But right now she’s singing...” Anna closed her eyes and waved a hand in time to the beat of the drive. “‘Consider Yourself’ from *Oliver!* because you’re both making me feel so welcome.”

She hummed a few bars, then became self-conscious and stopped, shrugging sheepishly. “Most of the songs I know are from musicals because when I was alone on the *Baltimore* all I had was the ship’s computer and it wasn’t much for conversation. So I came up with an imaginary friend I called my Music Man, and Music Man showed me how to find the whole library of historic Broadway musicals in the archives. I had a soundtrack or a movie playing nearly all the time after that, so it keeps going in my head even though it’s not actually playing around me anymore.”

“Intriguing,” Data said. “I am curious: did it help to alleviate loneliness?”

“Oh yes! Having those other voices around all the time let me imagine I was surrounded by people who loved me. I was Dorothy and Annie and Maria – all the Marias! – and those leading ladies were my Aunties. Judy and Julie and Bette and Barbra and Ethel and Idina and Liza and Angela and oh, all of them!”

“Sounds like quite a party,” Geordi said.

“Every day with all of my Aunties! And Gene Kelly too. Oh the crush I had on Gene Kelly! That man wasn’t entirely human the way he could move! The only non-musical movies I ever watched were his just to watch him leap about the place! In the *Three Musketeers* he climbs up a wall as easily as if he’s strolling down the boulevard! I practiced climbing like he did over and over until I could scale the walls nearly as fast, only of course my walls were also the floor and the ceiling, because,” she made a downward motion with her hand to indicate the direction of the nose of the crashed ship. “I rigged ropes up through the doors so I could get anywhere I needed to be as fast as Mr. Kelly!”

She gave them each a conspiratorial look. “I had it all planned out in my little kid head: despite being obviously dead for

centuries, Gene Kelly himself was going to come and rescue me. I mean why not? By the time I was nine years old that seemed just as plausible as anyone else coming for me.” Her joyful expression disappeared for a moment, but then came back as she shrugged and continued, “Anyway, he would dance down from the heavens and I would dance up my ropes to meet him and he’d take me back to Earth on his magical, musical ship made out of stars and butterfly wings and everything would be all right. All the while giving me that sparkling smile of his,” she said with a feigned swoon, but noticing their skeptical expressions she laughed again. “It was a perfectly sweet and innocent nine-year-old’s daydream!”

“It’s good that all gave you the hope you needed to get by,” Geordi said.

“I was always driven to fix the ship and try to get back, but I’m not sure I could’ve gotten through the failures without those glimmers of hope, you know? Oh but I’m babbling too much again, aren’t I? I do that when I’m nervous, but like happy nervous, not sad nervous or scared nervous. If I was sad nervous or really frightened I’d just hide and be silent and you wouldn’t even know I was there, which is probably what you wish right now, because I’m definitely wrecking this, aren’t I?”

Data replied, “I find what you are saying to be fascinating and nothing is being wrecked. I am curious to hear more of how you apply music theory to your experiences.”

“Really?” she asked, bouncing on her toes and clasping her hands together. “Now I’m definitely giddy! I’m liable to burst from it if I don’t climb the walls soon.” She turned to Geordi to ask, “Am I allowed to go up and have a look around?”

“Yeah, of course,” he said. “And if there’s anything you want to – whoa!” he exclaimed as Anna suddenly leapt upon the railing in front of them, springing up from there to grasp one of the supports for the upper level and swung herself under the railing up there.

“It’s just that I know you’ve made alterations to the magnetic constrictors because I’ve memorized all of your upgrade reports, and I really want to see them in action as much as I can while the

shielding is in place, obviously,” she said, bounding about the upper deck from floor to railing to wall console and then back to the railing again as she excitedly examined the core.

“Uh, okay, but we like to stay firmly on the decks,” Geordi said, trying to mask his terror that she was about to fall and get herself injured or killed right in front of him. “And there’s both a ladder and a lift so there’s really no need to –”

“I absolutely love what you’ve done with the constriction segment interfaces because that’s going to make the refit go so much more easily than if we had to build that side of things up from scratch,” Anna said as she took a few quick steps and then launched herself up the wall to grab ahold of the circular ridge around where the matter reaction assembly passed out of main engineering into the decks above. She hoisted herself up to sit on the narrow ledge and inspected the cables, hoses, and conduits housed there like rings around a central pole. “But you know that running your coolant pipes coiled up alongside your EPS conduits can actually create internal plasma drag, right?”

“Hey, we can get you another ladder or some other way to get up there,” Geordi said desperately as he climbed up the ladder to the upper level.

“I mean I know these ones are secondaries but I get the feeling from reading about your upgrades that you’re striving for peak efficiency, so if you push them further apart or get some insulation in between, you’ll get a fraction or two of performance improvement during switchover, especially with the new system.”

Several other engineering staff gathered below to gape at the strange sight of someone up where few of them ever bothered to go. Geordi noticed them, looked back down to an utterly perplexed Data on the main level, then called up to Anna, “We’ve got to get you down from there!”

Anna looked over the edge of the ridge at him in confusion, but then said, “Oh, sorry! I’m fine, perfectly safe. Like I said, I think vertically all the time. But I’ll come down if it’s spooking you, sorry.”

“Wait! Wait!” Geordi shouted. “Don’t jump!”

“I had no intention of jumping. I can climb down quite safely, I promise.”

“Someone get a ladder!” he called out to the gathered onlookers.

“No, it’s fine, I’m sorry,” Anna said as she fluidly glided off of the ridge, caught the edge in her hands, swung herself over to an angled protrusion on the wall and slid down it to land gracefully on the upper deck. “Didn’t mean to make you nervous,” she said as she walked up to Geordi.

“Right. Okay,” he said, taking a deep breath and leaning on the railing. “Please don’t ever do that again. I’m thrilled that you love this stuff as much as I do but I can’t live with the thought of you or anyone else getting hurt in here.”

“Sorry,” she said, all trace of mirth gone as she cringed into herself once more.

“It’s fine. You’re obviously really, really good at that, and I don’t want to stop you from checking out any part of the drive that you want to see, but I’m responsible for safety protocols in here, so if you could please just stick to the usual methods of getting around in here, that’d be great.”

“That was, however –”

Geordi was startled into a leap of his own when Data spoke behind him, having not noticed him come up the ladder a moment before. “Aw hell, Data, don’t sneak up on me like that!”

“I am sorry,” Data said. “I had no intention of sneaking.”

“No, you didn’t, I’m sorry,” Geordi said, trying to catch his breath. “Didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“It’s my fault for freaking you out,” Anna said, wringing her hands.

“Okay, nothing is anyone’s fault,” Geordi said. He laughed, whistled, and added, “This has been exciting but let’s never do it again. Anna, I’ve never seen anyone climb like that before.”

“Indeed, that was what I was about to say when I accidentally startled you,” Data said.

“Right. Good. Everybody’s fine now,” Geordi said, as if declaring it made it true.

“I promise I’ll try to remember to use the ladder or lift like a normal person from now on,” Anna said.

“Thanks. Why don’t we go to my office down there and get you set up on console access? There are chairs. Reasonably comfortable chairs. Sitting seems like a good plan for now,” Geordi said as he headed over to the ladder.

Anna turned to Data and winced. She whispered, “Did I just blow this?”

“Blow? Ah, as in, ‘blow it’, ‘mess up’, or ‘ruin’. No. Geordi will be fine in a moment. Besides, you were clearly in complete control and unlikely to fall.”

She smiled at him. There was something in her smile that he found oddly compelling, unlike any smile he’d ever seen before.



Stardate 47119.9 (Friday 02/13/2370, 18:26) – Deck Thirty-One – Room 5334, Anna’s Quarters

Once the combined exhilaration and consternation of being in a new place and meeting new people had finally given way to the exhaustion of several days of transport hopping, Anna excused herself to get some rest. By afternoon Data had left for the bridge anyway, Geordi was on to other work, and staring at an LCARS display had started to numb her tapped-out mind.

She tentatively made her way back to Deck Thirty-One, although less nervously than she had been when she first arrived; not because of fast familiarity, but because she’d heard casual conversation between some of the engineering staff that the captain wasn’t currently on board. She’d been careful not to react at the

time, but it meant one less thing to worry about, which was good because she'd worked herself into a significant state of worry over her climbing blunder.

At the corridor panel beside her door, she input the code Geordi had given her since she didn't have a combadge to open the door automatically on approach. He'd said to change it once she returned, so she went inside and immediately did so, setting it to 455412, the decimal-free stardate of what she considered to be her first real scientific publication. It also happened to be a pleasing pattern on the little numerical screen the panel provided.

Anna looked around the room again, trying to work out where to put hand-holds and how to adjust the sparse furniture for maximum mobility, but the act of looking upwards made her head swim with fatigue. She started to undress instead, but then felt very exposed by the uncovered window. She laughed at herself to realize she'd become so easily embarrassed since leaving Covaris Two, but nonetheless went to stand on the sofa beneath the window and peer outside. There was certainly no way anyone could see in unless they were in another ship far too close under any safety protocol, or standing on top of the starboard nacelle with binoculars. She muttered to herself, "Get over it, it's fine," and began to undress, tossing her clothes into the cleaning processor.

She winced as she pulled off her artificial leg; she'd had it on much too long throughout the travel and then today, especially having not worn it often in her little British flat. She set it on a chair, promising herself she'd clean out the thigh socket before bed, and then deftly made her way into the shower using whatever was close enough to lean on.

The warm water was, as always, a sweet luxury on her skin. Sonic showers did the job but water was decadent, comforting, enveloping. Anna nearly fell asleep leaning on the shower wall, but then the memory of the look of horror on Geordi's face popped back into her head and made her cringe again.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she grumbled as she shut off the water, exited the shower, and finished getting ready for bed, completely

forgetting to clean the thigh socket as usual. Back in her central room, she once again felt weirdly exposed to the open window, so she hurriedly grabbed the soft pajamas from her duffel and put them on.

She'd never cared much about clothing in her isolated youth, generally wearing smaller versions of the same jumpsuit she wore now. What would have been the point in bothering with anything pretty when nobody could see? Once on Earth and free, she'd tried pretty dresses but with her straight sides they never looked on her like she imagined they would, so she gave up on wearing them unless Dr. Cortez made her attend a function where something nicer than a jumpsuit was required.

But the one article of clothing she rediscovered on Earth that truly made her happy was soft, warm pajamas. On the Baltimore she hadn't even used a bed; she'd just slept wherever she was when she was tired enough to sleep, still in the jumpsuit or, if it was particularly hot, her underclothes. But England was colder than she was used to, especially during the night – something else she'd forgotten about on Covaris Two, which was gravitationally locked so the area where the Baltimore crashed was always facing the sun. Rediscovering pajamas felt like a victory over the elements, a little bit of civilization most people took for granted. This particular set had become her favourite, becoming even softer and more comfortable with habitual use. The tiny little blue butterflies all over them made her extraordinarily happy; sometimes she counted the ones she could see just for the joy of it.

Having them back on instantly made this room feel more hers, more like a new home. Not that anywhere had ever really been home for her, and not that she thought the Enterprise would be either. She cringed again about the climbing, and then began to worry that she'd babbled too much about music and made a fool out of herself in so many ways, possibly even ones she didn't realize.

Deciding some sleep would help her quickly escalating blues, she went into the bedroom but took one look at the thin blankets on the bed and frowned. “Computer, what’s the temperature in here?”

“Room temperature is currently set to default of twenty degrees centigrade,” the computer replied.

“Please set temperature in these quarters to twenty-three degrees.”

“Standard temperature for this room is now set to twenty-three degrees centigrade.”

“Thank you,” Anna replied, knowing it was unnecessary but a habit she’d developed on the Baltimore because it felt right to be polite to the only other thing she’d ever spoken to. Likewise, she went over to the replicator and said, “I need another blanket, please.”

“Specify parameters.”

“Display available choices.”

The screen showed several blankets, so she tapped the thickest-looking one. When it was produced, she took it out, unfolded it, examined it, and then requested, “Two more of these, please.” They appeared, she thanked the replicator, threw the blankets over her shoulder and leaned her way on the furniture back to the bedroom.

Halfway through spreading the blankets out, she decided to lie down across the bed for just a moment and ended up falling asleep with them askew over herself, looking very much like a child who still doesn’t quite understand how to sleep in a proper bed.



Stardate 47119.9 – Dessica Two – Wildlands Near the Ruins of Nafir

Picard scowled at the arid, rocky landscape in front of him, as if glaring at the mountainous horizon would make a difference. But unlike his crew back on the *Enterprise*, these rocks, this dirt, and those scrubby bits of vegetation all around seemed disinclined to heed his frustration in any way.

Nearly a year's worth of networking, explanations, negotiations, ingratiations, virtual stacks of forms upon forms upon forms between the Federation and the Romulan Senate, and it only comes to this, he thought bitterly.

He'd always considered the term "ruins" a misnomer, because while the remnants of a civilization may indeed be no longer maintained or even usable as they once had been, they weren't fully "ruined". They still yielded valuable information and stories to those who were patient and attentive enough, and he'd always had ample patience and attention to pay to places others so callously disregarded as "ruins".

But as he stood on the edge of what had been the ancient Romulan settlement of Nafir, "ruined" was the only apt word. Someone had been here recently and ruined the entire site. Walls that he knew to have been standing as recently as three months ago – because he'd been required to acknowledge on the forms the supposed good state of said walls – were now toppled. All of the hearths he'd been so eager to see and measure as part of his fascination with Romulan family and social structure had been blasted open, scattering their stones so widely as to mingle with one another in complete disarray.

His heart ached to think of the ancient hands that had built those hearths for their families, how many people had gathered around them in times of hope and need, and how the careful delineation of spaces in a Romulan household had served as representations of Romulan culture: order, honour, togetherness in privacy, rigid hierarchies that nonetheless ensured everyone was included and important. These homes, these hearths, these walls, they had all meant something much more than shelter to the people who had lived here, and they had all meant something much more

than archeology to those who had studied them since. They were the echo of life itself.

This callous destruction was a spit in the eye of all of that. It was an affront to everything he valued, to everything that these settlers had valued, and he was sickened to his core.

He'd been so excited the entire trip, even having left his comfortable and familiar Enterprise to travel on increasingly cramped and questionable transports. The rugged hike from the spaceport at Neral Station to Nafir had been filled with eager enthusiasm, all of which had been extinguished as readily as a bucket of water over a campfire when he'd crested the final hill earlier today and beheld the destruction. What tiny hopes had lingered as he searched for anything whole had all been snuffed as well, one by one.

He shook his head. There was nothing here. Nafir was now truly ruined.

He petulantly kicked a nearby stone, the rattle of it through others of its kind striking him as a mocking, rocky laughter. Only the barest shred of maturity kept him from kicking more, from throwing things, from roaring a full scolding at the uncaring sky above.

Instead, he walked partway back up the hill and sat upon a relatively flat surface of a protruding rock. He rested his chin on his hand, completely unaware that his pose looked quite like Rodin's famous Thinker, though he'd have appreciated the parallel if he'd noticed. But he'd shifted modes from the Picard who loved art and culture to the Picard who could leave no mystery unexamined, no injustice left unanswered.

He considered summoning the Enterprise back early, but quickly abandoned that idea. They were busy light years away on a Federation project that had once before been made to wait while he focused on a Romulan issue. Further, he knew whomever had perpetrated this crime was likely part of an unseemly underground network, not merely bullying fools kicking over sandcastles. The destruction was both too complete and too surgical; someone had

been looking for something, and whether they'd found it or not they'd levelled the place to ensure nobody else could gain anything from this site ever again. People like that would not readily answer questions from an illustrious Starfleet vessel in orbit, and those who may have witnessed anything would scurry to cover of darkness at the first hint of a uniform.

Picard looked down at his nondescript clothing, meant to be comfortable for digging in the dirt. Now they'd have to serve to dig around in more figurative dirt to find out who'd perpetuated this monstrosity, though he considered it might be worth a trip around the nasty little settlements of the Free Haven continent of Dessica Two to acquire some second-hand additional elements and give himself a more rugged look with less academic flair. He could also use the travel to assign himself another identity; perhaps as an illegal trader of antiquities similar to Vash, though much grittier and dangerous-looking. After all, he felt dangerous in his righteous anger. *Possibly too dangerous*, he thought, realizing he needed to keep that anger in check.

"In all things, the archaeologist must defend the truth of the past from the pernicious fingers of the future," Professor Richard Galen's voice rang in his mind.

Picard sat up straight, as if the presence of his mentor dictated a schoolboy's attentive posture. He smiled briefly at the memory of the father figure who'd understood him better than his actual father, but his smile faded at the nagging memory of his own potential fatherhood. He tried instead to focus on thoughts of Galen and all that he'd learned from him, how very tempting it had been to run off and follow in his footsteps, not only for the thrill of discovery but for the approval in the old man's eyes. The twinkle that came from shared joy in the dustiest old artifact gave Picard the most wholesome sense of belonging he'd ever known, and he missed Galen terribly. He also still felt responsible for the Professor's death, regardless of Troi's assurances otherwise.

"Be glad you didn't see this, my friend," he said to the sky above the ruins. He decided in that moment to borrow Galen's

name for the false identity he'd assume, and to bring these vandals to justice in that name, in his mentor's honour.

Noting that the sky was darkening, he sighed and began to set up camp, still a respectful distance from the ruins even if it hardly mattered anymore. His reverence of the site remained, and in fact was even heightened for the destruction. Once his small campfire was set up, he boiled some water for his tea and heated himself a meal from his pack. These actions comforted him and reminded him of his days back in France as a boy, staying out on a hill in the back meadow far too late, staring into a very different sky so many light years away. His father had always grumbled about it, but Maman had indulged him, much as he'd noticed Marie indulging his nephew René when he'd returned to La Barre a few years ago.

Picard smiled to think of how dark that meadow could get on a moonless night, how the stars overhead sparkled so brightly in contrast, and how that one small light left on in the kitchen window told him Maman was waiting for him with a warm chamomile and biscuit. She'd seldom outright told him she approved, but it was there in her eyes, just as it had been in Galen's.

Suddenly the image of his mother's face in his mind was replaced by the photo he'd seen of Anna White. He nearly dropped his tea and had to set it down on the ground beside him as the weight of that issue hit him once again. This time he couldn't push it away; had that little girl stared up at a starry sky on the other side of the quadrant? *No, she didn't get to see stars until she returned to them*, he thought, having read the report that said the Baltimore had crashed on the sunny side of the gravitationally locked Covaris Two. She'd have stared into a scorching sky whenever she looked to the heavens. They'd both been desperate to get up there, but for him it had been seeking the thrill of exploration and adventure; for her, an escape of lonely desolation. Nobody had waited nearby for her with a treat and an understanding sparkle in their eyes.

If she's mine, that was my job, he thought, his heart heavy with guilt. And whether she's mine or not, it's a damned tragedy for any child to grow up like that.

These notions combined with his despair for Nafir, missing that gentle French meadow, missing his mother, missing Galen, and suddenly feeling very small in the face of too much injustice until he was overwhelmed by profound sadness.

Jean-Luc Picard, the great man who had faced some of the worst foes in this galaxy, who had prevailed through so many terrifying battles, who had emerged triumphant over so many galactic trials and diplomatic tribulations, now sat in the dusty remnants of a long-dead settlement on a wholly unpleasant planet far from home and wept silent tears for that little girl, for those he had lost, and for everyone who had been erased from the terrain before him.



Stardate 47120.3 (Friday 02/13/2370, 21:57) – USS Enterprise – Bridge

The aft turbolift door opened and La Forge walked out onto the bridge. Riker glanced at him from the captain's chair. "Long day?"

"Yeah, but good," La Forge replied.

"Everything set for when we reach Doraf in the morning?"

"As much as it can be, given what was brought aboard. I've got some final tests and calibrations running overnight but we should deploy on schedule at 0500."

"Good. This whole thing has waited far too long since we were redirected last time," Riker said, gesturing to the small seat beside Troi's empty chair.

“Sometimes waiting isn’t a bad thing,” La Forge replied as he sat down. “This new equipment is going to make terraforming a lot faster. Plus I hear that the new addition to the terraforming team we picked up at Starbase 58 this morning is an expert on integrating this stuff into the older framework so it should all come together nicely.”

“Benet, yes, apparently he’s the hottest rising star of the terraforming world these days. Didn’t you get your new expert today too?”

“We did, and she’s pretty fantastic, isn’t she Data?”

Data turned in his seat at ops to face the other two. “She is indeed impressive.”

“Well anyone who impresses you must be pretty good,” Riker said.

“Indeed, sir.”

La Forge said, “Hey Data, I’ve just finished the recalibration of the neutrino spectrometers to get their data stream better aligned to the quark resonance scanners according to the specs the terraforming team asked for. It’s been running a test mode for just over an hour now. Do me a favour and check if the output is viable?”

Data turned back to his console and tapped the display several times. “The overall information package appears to be coherent enough to process satisfactory geologic structure analyses, but I am reading a one-point-three percent variance in the matched output stream.”

Riker asked, “Is that good enough to keep the terraforming team happy?”

“It’s pretty good and they’d be putting it on thick if they complained given what they came to me with a month ago, but if I could get it below one percent they’d have to be satisfied for sure,” La Forge replied.

“Is that plausible overnight?”

“Not if I’m going to be coherent tomorrow too,” La Forge replied with a chuckle. “I’ll have another crack at it in the morning

when I don't feel like the walls are starting to wobble, especially because we were also going to try a temporary new EPS boost but we've only just got those parts in from Starbase 58 too."

"I am scheduled for third shift bridge duty at 2300 but if you wish for me to go to engineering to attempt to further align the streams and attend to the sample EPS power feed inputs, I am certain a shift change can be arranged, sir?" Data said, directing the last question to Riker.

"Of course. What are you two up to now?"

La Forge explained, "The new core system we'll be getting requires an overhaul of the entire plasma line from intermix to nacelles. We'll be doing that at time of the new core installation, but we've been running tests on some side theories about expanding that new methodology out to general power systems throughout the ship."

"The eventual hope is to make better varied use of power during different drive modes to reduce competition for demand, sir," Data clarified. "Because of the discrepancy of power needs when the Enterprise is stationary versus at impulse or warp, we are hoping upgrades to the EPS network will allow for more efficient power handling regardless of system load."

"You mean when we're not moving but throwing everything we've got at some nebula to chart, we'd be using power reserved from when we warped to that nebula in the first place? Like a battery?" Riker asked.

"A battery would serve as a...simplistic analogy, yes sir," Data said with slightly overdone attempt at an indulgent smile.

"But instead of storing power – which is really inefficient – the idea is the plasma flow through the EPS network would do advanced pre-distribution based on anticipated load," La Forge said. "It's a long-term project, but we thought we might give it a limited trial at Dorif Prime so when terraforming is sucking down a huge amount of power for their startup no other department will have to give anything up or complain because they can't run some other energy-intensive project."

Riker appeared impressed. “I’m all for interdepartmental harmony. Data, if you can get any of that going overnight, that’s worth passing off bridge duty. I’ll call up Lieutenant Bakker instead. He’s been itching to increase his bridge hours before the next round of assessments. But I’d be happier about it if you started the shift and then left him to it just to make sure everything’s stable before you head down.”

“Of course sir. I will plan to give Mr. Bakker the bridge and proceed to engineering at 0200.”

La Forge stood and stretched his arms. “If you need me, Data, wake me. Otherwise I’m off to get some shut-eye before our early morning start. I’ll see you down there at 0500 unless you need me earlier than that.”

Data turned back to his console as he said, “I am confident you will be able to remain asleep undisturbed. Good night.”

La Forge and Riker shared a quiet grin at their friend’s typically atypical take on social graces, and then La Forge headed back to the turbolift.

CHAPTER THREE

Stardate 47120.7 (Saturday 02/14/2370, 01:20)

Anna sighed. She'd managed to get some sleep and then had gotten up to eat and then tried to fall back asleep, but eventually hit the point where being in bed was getting boring. She gave up, rose, got dressed, and then cautiously made her way back down to main engineering.

The whole area had a different feel about it with only a scant night crew watching over key systems. Nobody was running around, nobody was dealing with anything urgent, and with Geordi not there, nobody was constantly coming into the Chief Engineer's corner to ask an opinion on this or permission for that. Instead, there were a few people tapping quietly at consoles. It made Anna feel as if she was sneaking in where she didn't belong even though she knew she had permission to be there. She half expected to be challenged, questioned, but no one even looked up at her as she quietly walked through and went to gaze at the core again.

Once there, she smiled up at it as she had earlier. It was even easier in this now-quiet space to let the engine's hum waft over her, almost lulling her back to sleep. She wanted to answer, to talk to it as she'd so often spoken to the drive on the Baltimore, but knew that would definitely get her unwanted attention from the engineers around her. She resisted the temptation by grabbing a tricorder from the nearby shelf, dutifully climbing the ladder to the upper deck, and then wandering around taking readings of anything that caught her fancy.

After about half an hour she took hold of the ladder's rails and deftly slid down, only realizing at the bottom that she was probably expected to use the actual steps. She looked around nervously, but nobody appeared to have noticed. *Geez Louise you can get away with just about anything in here in the middle of the night*, she

thought, not as a cheeky invitation to misbehave but rather a sudden concern for security. *Because if I can get away with anything, what can someone else get away with against me?*

She shuddered and suddenly felt very exposed, which set off her need to examine the room for defensive positions and escape routes. With the tricorder in hand as if she was still taking engine readings, Anna instead crept about thinking about how she could climb away here, swing away there, get Jefferies access down on that side, hide under that console. She started imagining increasingly worse scenarios, getting herself worked up one moment and telling herself not to be silly the next, but then imagining something even worse all over again.

At the point where she was mentally measuring the distance from Geordi's corner to the main exit and calculating steps over the central console in case a crowd of people ever came at her, Data walked in. Anna felt immediate relief, as if all of the imagined threats were chased away by his presence alone. Without even realizing it, she burst into a grateful smile and said, "Oh! Hi! You're here!"

Data stopped and tilted his head to one side. "Hello. Were you unable to sleep satisfactorily in your quarters?"

"Actually I slept for about five hours, which is really good for me. Usually I only sleep a few hours at a time and I have to get exhausted to sleep again. If I try to sleep on a schedule I lie there worrying about nightmares which then causes nightmares, but if I go until I'm exhausted and drop I sleep longer and more peacefully."

"Intriguing," Data replied. "I have recently been experimenting with sleep myself. It is a more complicated procedure than most humans seem to indicate."

"Yeah, this whole human thing of sleeping on a schedule is very weird, or sleeping in a specific bed. I used to love sleeping by the Baltimore's drive and I was just thinking how nice it'd be to curl up for a nap up there," she said, pointing over her shoulder to

the upper deck around the warp core. “But after I goofed up with the climbing thing earlier, I’m not even going to consider it.”

Data nodded. “I do not think Geordi would approve of anyone sleeping in main engineering.”

“Probably not.”

“Though I do believe you are worrying too much about his reaction earlier.”

She shrugged awkwardly. “Got anything I can help with right now? I’m itching for a good puzzle.”

“I have two potential puzzles that may interest you,” he said. He summarized both the alignment of the data streams needed for the terraforming project and his and Geordi’s experiments with advanced EPS power distribution.

Anna grinned throughout his explanations. When he was done she clapped her hands excitedly. “Both are really juicy!”

Data raised an eyebrow. “Juicy?”

“Like you just want to sink your teeth in and gobble it up to find out everything about it.”

“Hm. As I have no sense of taste, I find your metaphor confusing. However, I appreciate your enthusiasm even if I do not fully grasp the concept of ingesting a problem in order to solve it.”

“Because if you eat it, you’re wrapping your whole self around it and making it part of you so then the solution can pour out your fingers,” Anna explained, making large gestures of mimed eating and then wiggling her fingers all around. “If we take a bite out of the warp core and a bite out of the impulse drive and then look at the whole EPS power distribution network, the answer will flow through us. Metaphorically, I mean. I don’t actually advocate eating the drives on account of, you know, death.”

Data’s brow furrowed as he attempted to understand.

Anna laughed at his reaction, but then her eyes went wide and she exclaimed, “Oh! Oh oh oh oh!” She spread her hands wide as if generating a screen in front of herself, and began swiping through information upon it. “Right now the load arrangement

between the drives is handled at the ODN level from the bridge with redundancy in the battle bridge, but that's hardly used, right?"

"That is correct."

"So while in standard mode, there's no reason to give the battle bridge that much of a share of the load arrangement handling because just by trunk distance alone there's going to be microlag." She moved her hands as if zooming in and out on a spec diagram that wasn't actually there. "What if we recoded the system to prioritize main bridge ODN handling at a higher level and in return improved the handover system to the battle bridge for when it's needed?" She swiped again and asked, "What percentage of the energy from your IPS exhaust plasma is captured by your MHDs during propulsion?"

"Typically only fifty-four percent."

"Fifty-four is pretty good, but that's probably because you'e got the exhaust passing through during combined mode, right?"

"That is standard procedure, yes," Data answered as he moved to stand beside her, trying to glean the invisible things she was moving around before her.

In turn, Anna began to point to the imaginary screen as if he could see it as well. "Right, but if you let the bridge ODN handle a greater share of the power load arrangement so it's more responsive on the fly, then it can also be set to manage that exhaust flow more efficiently in a distributed, needs-based manner, which then means you can better utilize your impulse power generation and distribution at the times when you're looking to increase overall load because you're studying something across multiple departments, yes?" She glanced at him but didn't wait for an answer. "And then if you do likewise on the warp side, you end up with an overall more efficient power handling system that isn't so bound by the specifics of propulsion at any given time. The ship's computer is fast and smart; give her the power to arrange more of what she needs around herself." With that, she grabbed through the air as she'd done the day before, as if she was collapsing the

screen, and then put her hands triumphantly on her hips and looked to him for a response.

Utterly baffled by her actions and yet intrigued by her proposal, Data replied, “I see. Yes. That has potential. However, it is a significant undertaking across multiple core systems. We would be unable to even begin a project of that scale overnight.”

“Yes, but you were going to run some small scale, temporary tests on the EPS to play around with pre-distribution cycles based on the terraformers’ needs later today, right?”

“Yes.”

“So let’s create a redundant ODN test bed off to the side and teach it the terraformers’ needs and see what it can handle.”

“We already have an ODN simulation framework for precisely this sort of testing,” Data said.

Anna grinned and threw her arms in the air. “Why, we’re more than halfway done and the night’s barely started!”

“That is...an intriguing perspective.”

“If you give me access to that test bed I can hammer at it while you take the sensor data stream merging. Metaphorically, again. No actual hammering. Yet.”

Data nodded, went to the console at the end of Geordi’s corner, and linked Anna into a fresh simulation on their test network. She sat down and got right to it at a speed he found unusually impressive for a human. While she worked, he went about the room using the other consoles to access the spectrometers, scanners, and their combined information.

After about half an hour he announced, “I have succeeded in aligning the data streams within zero-point-six-eight percent.”

Without looking up from her console, she replied, “That ought to be more than good enough for the fussiest terraforming system. Unless something’s changed since I last looked at terraforming equipment, their network won’t even notice discrepancies below three percent, will it?”

“There have been recent upgrades but that threshold is still correct. I believe this arrangement will satisfy both Geordi and the terraforming team. How is your simulation coming?”

“Come have a look for yourself,” she replied with a grin.

He stood over her, watching her simulation playback over her shoulder. His brow arched as he said, “That is impressive.”

“It’s not quite done because I still have to account for this system set,” she said, pointing to a list at the side. “But I did the hard ones first so all of these should plug in fine. Why, it’s simply a matter of telling the computer what I want from here on.”

Data’s brow furrowed again. “May I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Why do you begin so many non-question sentences with the word ‘why’? I have not encountered this speech pattern before.”

Anna wrinkled her nose. “Oh no, am I doing that again? Sorry. It drove Dr. Cortez nuts. It’s from whenever I watch my favourite movie, which I watch whenever I’m nervous, and I was so nervous on the trip here I watched it over and over on my own PADD. I pick up their speech patterns because those were the only conversations I heard for most of my life, and I had no idea nobody talks like that anymore until I got back. I’ll try to stop it.”

“There is no need to alter your phrasing. I was merely curious, and also wished to ensure you were not using it to ask a question that I was perhaps missing. You should by all means continue to speak in a manner that suits your needs. I will note it as one of your normal mannerisms.”

“So...it doesn’t bother you?”

“No. Should it?”

“I don’t know. I never know what to expect from people. Everything is so inconsistent.”

“I have observed that as well, which is why I find it meaningful to make note of individual preferences and idiosyncrasies, to better tailor my reactions.”

She smiled a little. “Is that part of friendship? Adapting expectations to the specific relationship? It seems that’d have to be part of it.”

“In my experience of friendship, yes.”

“So even if I speak in weird ways, you’d still be my friend in spite of that?”

Data tilted his head to consider this, then replied, “Not ‘in spite of’ but because of. Your mannerisms are part of what make you you. Therefore I value those as much as any other aspect of your personality, such as your enthusiastic technical expertise. Would you like assistance with the secondary system set?”

“Why, yes, yes I would,” she said, beaming that particularly enormous smile at him again, and once again he found it temporarily distracting as he sat down beside her. But then she turned her eyes back to the console, so he refocused and began working with her at what he deemed to be a notable level of harmony and efficiency.



Shortly before 0500, Data declared, “That finalizes the last segment.”

Anna clapped her hands. “I adore it!”

“It is a highly satisfying result given the deadline. I believe Geordi will also be pleased.”

“That was the most fun I’ve ever had working on a system like this. Did you have fun?”

“I do not experience ‘fun’.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because I am an android.”

Anna looked confused. “You said it was highly satisfying.”

“Yes.”

“And the way we worked together was amazing. It was like we knew what we were each about to do and bam bam bam done.”

“We appear to make an efficient team.”

“And you found it engaging and interesting and hopefully you’d like to work with me like that again sometime? Because I can’t wait to do tackle another problem with you!”

“I look forward to another similar shared experience of this nature, yes.”

She shrugged at him. “So if it was all of those things, isn’t that what constitutes fun?”

Data began to object, but then tilted his head and considered her words. “That is a fascinating hypothesis. I will need to examine it further.”

“As in, you’d enjoy picking apart the semantics of it and weighing out how all of those words fit the experience?”

Data nodded. “I would.”

She grinned mischievously at him, turned her chair, and then leaned her head and shoulders over the back so she was looking at him upside down. “So what you’re telling me is that android fun is just like anybody else’s fun because it all depends on the person and how they define all of those parameters for themselves?”

Data’s brows raised at this new concept. “You have an intriguing way of –”

A man in a blue uniform strode aggressively into main engineering at that moment, shouting, “What the hell have you people been doing with my equipment?”

Anna scurried to hide behind the rear wall of Geordi’s corner.

Data found her reaction concerning; further, he disliked the abrupt end to their conversation. He stood and addressed the angry man whom he recognized from the alterations to the crew manifest from Starbase 58. “Excuse me Lieutenant Benet, but what seems to be the problem?” Though Data sounded perfectly polite, he was deliberately using the particular cadence and tone that Geordi had labelled his “second officer’s voice”.

The man glared at Data but then stopped short and in a more measured tone of his own said, “I thought everything was in order but I’ve just been in the cargo bay and my equipment is not to my specifications. Sir.”

“I apologize if we have not met your expectations, but I assure you we have been working towards doing so with great care. If the problem is the data stream alignment, I have personally brought the variance within zero-point-six-eight percent within the last few hours.”

Benet sneered. “No, not the damned data stream, I mean the hydroprocessor circuitry! Where’s La Forge? I need to speak to La Forge.”

“Commander La Forge is expected at 0500 hours. That is in twelve minutes.”

“Well tell him to meet me in Cargo Bay Two as soon as possible. Please. Sir,” he said, clearly infuriated yet reluctantly recognizing the rank before him. He turned and began to march back out of engineering, but then suddenly stopped at the entrance and asked, “Zero-point-six-eight percent? Really?”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” Data replied with a firmly neutral expression.

Benet grunted and resumed storming off.

“That was exciting for night shift,” muttered Ensign Wong from beside the warp core. Several of the overnight crew had left their stations to have a peek at what was going on, but most were already heading back to their posts.

“Indeed, Ensign,” Data replied, but instead of turning to the young officer behind him, he looked to Anna coming out from the back corner. “Are you all right?”

She sheepishly approached him, carefully checking the main room as she went. “Sorry. He spooked me.”

“His manner was unduly abrupt, but I do not believe he meant you any harm.”

When she was right beside him she whispered, “I get very nervous around aggressive men.”

Data nodded. “Understood. But you are safe here.”

She smiled up at him a little, but then looked towards the door again as if she expected him to return.

Data tapped his combadge. “Data to La Forge.”

“Yeah, yeah, Data, I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Lieutenant Benet was just here and appears to have some concerns regarding the terraforming equipment in Cargo Bay Two. He requested your presence at your earliest convenience.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re making that sound nicer than it is? I’m on my way to engineering first. I’ll meet you there in a minute. La Forge out.”

Data turned to Wong and said, “Ensign, please go to Cargo Bay Two and inform Lieutenant Benet that Lieutenant Commander La Forge and I will be there soon to assist him.” His emphasis on the ranks was subtle, but still clear.

“Yes sir,” said Wong.

“And Ensign, you may find it helpful to offer him assistance of your own. Though you are likely to be rejected, please remain in the cargo bay until we join you.”

“In case my assistance is needed at any point?” Wong asked with a knowing grin.

“Precisely, Ensign.”

“Understood, sir.”

As Wong left Anna asked, “Did you just send him as a watchdog?”

“We are merely extending our continued assistance to the terraforming team,” Data replied.

“I think you might be sneakier than you seem on the outside.”

“I believe the preferred descriptor is, ‘diplomatic’.”

Anna chuckled just as Geordi arrived.

“What’s up?” he asked.

Data replied, “Though we were able to get the merged data stream to well within tolerance, it would appear there is an issue with the hydroprocessor circuitry. Lieutenant Benet was rather... forceful in his expressions of concern.”

Geordi shook his head and muttered, “Figures. Okay, let’s head down there. Brace for impact.”

Data said to Anna, “If you found the lieutenant’s aggression upsetting, you do not need to come. However, if you wish to be present to implement the initial phase of the EPS alterations in conjunction with the terraforming equipment, I assure you that you will be entirely safe.”

“I normally don’t believe anyone when they say that, but somehow I do believe it coming from you. I’ll tag along. Besides, I kind of liked seeing you put a loudmouth like that in place. It was inspiring.”



As they entered the cargo bay, Anna noticed Ensign Wong give Data a more muted version of the same knowing grin he’d used in engineering. Data gave a small nod in reply. She wasn’t sure exactly what was being communicated, but found the whole thing interesting to watch and hoped one day she might be enough a part of this team that she could speak volumes with a simple nod herself.

Likewise, she found it fascinating to watch as Geordi approached the still-fuming Lieutenant Benet and attempted to defuse him. At first Benet seemed determined to remain angry, but Geordi had a calming way about him that made Anna wonder how well she’d been handled the day before. But then she glanced up at Data at her side, saw him turn and give her an encouraging smile, and she decided however these two were placating her was a welcome change.

It wasn’t as if she’d never had someone go out of their way to accommodate her before. Researchers who wanted her on board were often overreaching in their apparent kindness and flattery. But even as socially inept as she was, Anna was still entirely able to

recognize when she was being catered to because someone wanted something from her. It had become so common that she'd started to wonder if genuine friendship even existed in the universe.

As she watched Geordi, however, she realized he was speaking to Benet differently than he'd spoken to her. She was trying to suss out the particulars of what made it different when some of Benet's words filtered through her distracted state to alert her brain to something familiar.

"I don't care about the efficiency of the new set!" Benet said in exasperation. "The computing modules are not suitable for the temperatures on Doraf Prime! That's why I specifically put in my list to use the 850 generation models, not the 900 ones!"

Before she even thought better of it, Anna blurted out, "So swap out the modules for the same ones the Enterprise uses for atmospheric processing units." All eyes turned to her, which made her blood run cold. "I mean, surely you have a whole pile of spares for regular maintenance on the APUs?" she asked Geordi, trying to sound confident while suppressing a shudder.

"Yeah, we have dozens of them. They're required emergency stock," Geordi replied.

Anna tentatively approached the equipment in front of Geordi and Benet and flipped open the access panel on the unit closest to her. "Those will be the same spec and work in here just fine," she said, pointing inside the hydroprocessor. "You just have to reset it to remove sulphur from the soil instead of carbon dioxide from the air, and replenish nitrogen into the soil instead of oxygen into the air. Five minutes' programming, tops. It's even the same form factor so it'll pop right in."

Benet glared at her. "I don't know who you are, but that's idiotic."

Instead of being cowed by his anger again, Anna felt increasingly annoyed. She shook her head as she firmly declared, "Nope. It'll work."

"Have much experience in terraforming, do you?" Benet scoffed.

“No,” she replied.

“Exactly.”

Geordi started to intervene but Anna spoke over him to say, “But I have plenty of experience repurposing terraforming hydroprocessor circuitry to repair APUs.”

Benet shook his head. “That’s insane.”

Anna flatly said, “No it’s not. My ship’s APUs were totally fried which was fine when I was on Covaris Two with a decent enough air supply all around, but I needed to rebuild them before I could launch back into space. My supply of non-replicable raw materials was running low so instead of using any of that to make new APUs I just raided the terraforming equipment we had on board for preliminary studies on Covaris Three because clearly it was never going to get over there. The units are swappable, because I’ve swapped them. Trust me, you can definitely put a current standard APU command module into your hydroprocessor here and it’ll act the same as an earlier generation native unit.”

Benet’s jaw dropped.

Anna rolled her eyes. “Or fine, don’t believe me, I guess I’m not a terraformer. I just grew up surrounded by terraforming equipment and poached nearly all of its parts for use somewhere else,” she said with a shrug as she walked back over to Data. “Data if you can show me where you keep the APU spares, I’d be more than happy to help reprogram them to get the hydroprocessors up and running.”

Data nodded. “They are in Cargo Bay Four. I will take you to them.”

With that, the two of them left, leaving Geordi standing beside the still gobsmacked Benet.

Geordi said, “Sounds like we can fix this for you easily after all.”

“But...she must be...she’s talking about the Baltimore.”

“Yeah.”

Benet’s eyes went as wide as his mouth. “Holy shit, that’s Anna White.”

“Yeah.”

“She was on the same transport to Starbase 58 I was. I sat that close to the Anna White for that long and didn’t even talk to her. Didn’t even notice her there.”

Geordi leaned in and gently suggested, “Maybe you should listen to her now.”



By the middle of the day, the Enterprise crew along with Anna had set everything right for the terraforming team, so the equipment and personnel were beamed to the surface of Doraf Prime. Benet maintained an awestruck distance from Anna the entire time, which amused Geordi but kept Anna fluctuating between wariness and irritation, especially once Data was recalled to the bridge.

On the walk back to main engineering once the cargo bay was cleared, Geordi asked, “You okay?”

“Me? I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Just checking. Benet was a bit of a jerk but you put him in his place.”

Anna shrugged. “I’ve run into that type a lot. They suppose they know everything about everything and don’t like weird suggestions, and I’m made out of weird suggestions. He was annoying but I’ll forget about him soon enough. He’s too common.”

“Ouch,” Geordi said with a laugh as they entered the turbolift.

“In fact, I refuse to think about him any further. Let’s talk about something else. I have a random question: are there really dolphins on board?”

“Not at the moment, but we do maintain the facilities for Cetacean Ops, yes,” Geordi explained. “They haven’t been here for about a year, though. The Lancaster is also Galaxy class, and she

was assigned to research non-humanoid life support so most of the Cetacean Ops folks are on the Lancaster leading the research out at Pacifica. They'll probably end up back on board at some point, though, if you're keen to see them. They do like visitors," he added with a chuckle. "Well, the dolphins do. The human staff don't like feeling they're in a zoo with people coming to gawk, but I'll introduce you next time they're on board."

As they stepped off the turbolift, Anna once again inspected the corridor carefully before proceeding, and then said, "I both want to and don't. That much water terrifies me. Pacifica was a reasonable option when I left Covaris but there was no way I was going from a desert to an ocean. I can't even swim! When I finally got free on Earth I went to go see the ocean and I was overwhelmed by the endless bigness of it. It felt like at any moment it could reach up a wave and snatch me away to drown."

"I can understand that. My VISOR interprets water very differently from air. I know it's not a solid but in some ways it appears as one to me, and yet not. It can be pretty disorienting. Still, I remember as a kid getting to go to a beach and I loved the smell of the salt water."

"Oh yes. From well up shore it's quite lovely. I quite enjoyed some of England's coastal cliff views. It's weird though: I'm not at all afraid to stand right on the edge of a cliff over land, but I am terrified of standing over water, when a fall onto land would inevitably do more damage than a proper dive into water."

"Why didn't you get some swimming lessons then?" he asked as they walked over to his corner of engineering.

Anna shrugged again. "Would've had to talk to people while being simultaneously terrified of the water and the people. It wasn't high on my list of things to do. But speaking of lists of things to do, here," she said as she tapped the console to bring up the simulation she and Data had finished earlier.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Data told me about your EPS power distribution plans so I came up with some theories and we ran some simulations

overnight. It's not complete but it's a definite proof of concept. And while you were helping the terraforming team get everything sent down, Data implemented a partial live test of this. He said he'll be monitoring it from the bridge so I guess you could go see that up there with him, but this simulation shows what we did."

Geordi sat down to scroll his way through the information on the console. He kept starting to ask questions or express doubts only to find each was answered as he examined the project further. When he got to the end he turned and looked up at Anna in disbelief. "You two did this just overnight?"

"Yeah. I mean it needs more work but –"

"Anna, this is a week's worth of work at least!"

She laughed, but then raised an eyebrow. "Wait, you're serious."

"Yeah!"

"Why, it's just an initial sim and sideline test run, no big deal. Primer-level stuff, just rearranged into something new and potentially useful."

"Anna, reconfiguring the Enterprise's entire EPS and ODN for this much potential power boost isn't primer-level!"

"It is to me. This is what I do, what you brought me here for, to look at piles of stuff and see past the Starfleet manuals to come up with weird ideas. I'm particularly good with power efficiency because I had to be. If you're looking to stump me, ask me to do something with communications. But actually please don't, comm systems are super boring. They either work or they don't and other than security protocols on top they haven't changed much in hundreds of years. You speak or type into one side, there's a transmission protocol, the other side receives. Boring. But I admit I have no clue about any of it on board so yeah, if you're looking to push me –"

"Push you? I figured Data and I would be doing this for weeks and sure maybe bring you in somewhere along the line in the lead-up to the new core installation, but it never occurred to me the two

of you would blaze through it in your first twenty-four hours on board!”

“I can pretend to go slower if that helps?” she suggested somewhat nervously. “Dr. McLeod oh-so-politely informed me that while Daystrom has high expectations, too much output too fast could make people angry. I never understood that but I could tell she was already angry so I asked Dr. Cortez and she said just to keep doing whatever I wanted to do at my own pace. But I could tell there’s a lot of social side to this that I just don’t understand, so if you need me to fake it slower, I can.”

Geordi laughed. “Well, that sounds familiar. By the way, why am I sitting while you’re standing? Here,” he said as he got up and indicated for her to take the chair.

“You’ve been told to slow down too?” she asked as she sat.

“Not me so much, but Data. He’s got stories of having to slow down to keep humans from getting jealous and angry. I told him they sound like people worth ignoring, but he had already learned to adapt before we met. I guess you weren’t kidding when you said you think you have a lot in common with him.”

“I was entirely serious.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that,” he said with another chuckle, feeling very pleased with himself for getting this strange but incredibly useful expert on board.



Stardate 47122.5 (Saturday 02/14/2370, 17:06) – Enterprise,
Orbiting Doraf Prime – Bridge

It was quiet that evening on the bridge. Tasks were performed with minimal conversation, and Riker knew it was because several of them were pulling double shifts while too many of the usual

faces were missing. He was comfortable enough in the captain's chair in a general sense, but it would never feel right to be in Picard's chair specifically. He hoped his friend was having fun playing archaeologist off in the dirt, but it had occurred to him earlier in the day that nobody had heard from the captain at all.

Riker had always found particular amusement in pushing Picard's archaeological buttons because he never saw the man quite so happy as when pursuing his favourite hobby. The way his eyes had lit up when his old professor had come aboard the year before – enlisting Riker in a surprise greeting and then delivering a funny-looking old carving filled with other carvings – had been so pure and heartwarming that the first officer could not help but grin to himself in the present at the memory. His grin faded, however, when he recalled that Picard had lost his mentor shortly thereafter. He wondered if that's why there hadn't yet been the usual gleeful message of discovery from Picard; was this trip part of his mourning? Or maybe he just hadn't found anything interesting yet. Then again, a man out on his own in the wilderness on a rough outpost of a planet...what if something had gone wrong?

"Incoming message from the surface, sir," Worf said behind him.

"On screen," Riker replied.

Lieutenant Commander Malika Abbas appeared on the screen. She looked as tired as he felt, but in a much happier way. "*Commander, I have excellent news. We've got everything running already! That's got to be a record time.*"

"I thought the power transfer was going to go on into the night," Riker said.

"*I assumed so as well but apparently your engineering crew works miracles.*" She nodded to Data sitting at his ops console. "*Commander Data, your experiment was definitely worth it. We're fully juiced up and already starting our initial cycles.*"

"Yes, Lieutenant. I observed four minutes ago that your power cells appear to be at maximum but I was awaiting your confirmation."

“Consider it confirmed. Please pass my gratitude to the whole team.”

“I will do so,” Data said politely.

Lieutenant Benet came into view behind Abbas and nervously said, *“Sir, could you please pass on my specific gratitude and apologies for my...um...over enthusiasm this morning? Specialist White’s fixes for the hydroprocessors are perfect and I’m sorry if I seemed...pushy.”*

Data glanced over his shoulder to Riker, but since Riker knew nothing of what had happened, he merely shrugged in reply. Data said, “I will pass along all of your kind words. I am certain they will be appreciated.”

Riker stood and approached the screen. “It sounds like it’s been a long day for everyone. We’re happy to stick around overnight as planned in case you require anything further.”

Abbas said, *“Let us get some initial confirmation readings back just to be sure, but after that we shouldn’t need a babysitter.”*

“We’re scheduled for several tasks in sectors R3 through T3 over the next several weeks, so before we head that way I want to make sure you’re stable,” Riker said. “Starbase 172 is your point of contact but it’s still more than 24 hours away at maximum warp.”

“I know, and we appreciate the concern,” Abbas replied with a friendly smile. *“I’m not going to lie, I’ll miss the creature comforts I’ve gotten used to on the Enterprise preparing for this mission over these last few weeks. But we’re all excited to be here and we can handle it. I’ll get back to you in about an hour or so with those final confirmations and then you can safely head out.”*

“Understood,” Riker said, and the transmission was ended.

“She sounds like my older sister telling our mom to stop calling her every day when she left for the Academy,” said Ensign Yoder at the helm.

Riker laughed. “Yeah, terraformers act like it’s about the tech but I think in their hearts they all love roughing it.” On his way back to the chair he looked up at Worf. “It won’t hurt us to head

back towards Starbase 247 slightly early to pick up Deanna on the way to retrieving the captain, unless anyone comes up with more for us in between.”

Worf checked his console and shook his head. “We have received no other orders between here and our scheduled stop at 247 on stardate 47130, sir.”

“Then that’s the plan,” Riker said as he sat down.

Data turned and said, “Sir, given the reasonable assumption that the terraforming team does not require us further, I would like to return to engineering to report on the EPS test and continue work on that project from there.”

“Of course Mr. Data,” Riker replied, prompting Data to stand and leave. One of the standby junior officers rushed to take the ops position instead.

That settled, the bridge went relatively quiet again, returning Riker to his nagging concern at not having heard from the captain. The more he thought about it, the more unusual it seemed, because on his past jaunts he’d always sent a communication even in the absence any great find. Riker knew it was Picard’s way of opening an opportunity to be told everything was well and in order back on board his beloved ship so he could continue to freely enjoy his time away.

Something’s not right, he thought. I can’t put my finger on it, and it’s not enough to worry anyone else with yet, but I can just tell that something’s not right.

CHAPTER FOUR

Stardate 47122.5 (Saturday 02/14/2370, 17:20) – Main Engineering

Word had gotten around quickly in engineering circles about Anna's fast successes, particularly having put Benet in his place with her casual solution to his problem. She was oblivious to the quiet background chatter at first, but gradually notice that the engineers were looking at her more than they had the day before, and smiling a lot. Anna returned their smiles, hoping she didn't look as awkward and nervous as she felt, but the more it happened the weirder and more conspicuous she felt, which made her more nervous, all repeating into a vicious circle.

Further, people kept inadvertently approaching her from behind whenever she tried to concentrate on the console, making her jumpy. She quickly learned to use the window to the warp core just above the console as a mirror for the main engineering entrance and central console. It wasn't perfect, but she incorporated regular glances upwards into her work so she had a good idea of who was behind her at any given time.

When Data returned later in the day, she saw him in the reflection and experienced a sudden relief as if he was chasing away all of her disquieting thoughts, once more breaking all of the emotional spirals that threatened to drag her down. She immediately turned her chair to give him a warm, enormous smile as he approached.

For his part, once again Data found her expression inexplicably distracting for a fraction of a second. He greeted her politely as Geordi came around the corner with his own ear-to-ear grin.

"Hey there, I've been waiting to congratulate you on the EPS test!" Geordi said to Data. "Terraformers happy?"

“They are indeed, and ahead of schedule in part due to the improved transitions from the test,” Data said. “However, the bulk of the congratulations goes to Anna.”

“Yeah well she said the same thing about you and believe me, I’ve been laying the thanks on thick for her all afternoon.”

“You have indeed,” Anna said.

Data asked her, “Would you care to begin a second phase of simulations?” But then his brow furrowed and he added, “Although by my calculations, you have been awake for a very long time. Do you not require sleep soon?”

“I’m insufficiently exhausted yet. I’ve got another hour or two in me and then I can go pretend to be human and collapse. One of you want to open a new test bed and let me loose in it?”

“Here,” Geordi said, leaning over and tapping the console where she sat. “When I get a chance in the next day or so, I’ll set up a permanent access so you can play in that sandbox any time you like, and in your lab upstairs too.”

“That’s very kind of you, thanks,” she said as she started to work.

“May I ask you a question?” Data asked her.

“Sure.”

“I have observed you repeatedly referring to humans as if you are not one of them. You are human, are you not?”

Anna wrinkled her nose, tilted her head to one side, and made a twisting motion with her hand to indicate a “so-so” reaction.

Data appeared confused. “Your mother is listed as genetically human. Was your father not human?”

“Hah! That’s one way to put it. No, that miserable jerk is entirely human as far as I know, just not very humane.”

“Then you are human?”

She laughed wryly. “I am. I just often feel like I’m on the outside of it all. *Tap tap tapping on the glass, waving through a window,*” she sang faintly. “For instance, not many humans do this at the end of the day,” she said as she reached down and pulled on her right shin so that her artificial leg hung loosely inside her

jumpsuit at an ungainly angle. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep it fairly hidden under the console, but it gets irritating by the end of a long day like this. I’d take it off fully but regular humans don’t tend to react well to that.”

At that moment Lieutenant Covett happened to be walking by and noticed. He paused, looked at Anna’s oddly-angled leg, and said, “You know I’ve got a cousin that lost an arm in the war with Cardassia.”

Data and Geordi both observed Anna’s smile shift from warm to icy almost instantly.

But Covett appeared not to notice as he continued, “He got himself a bio-limb and he says it’s as good as the original. Better in some ways.”

“I’m very happy for him,” Anna replied in a flat tone.

Geordi gestured to indicate for Covett to drop the matter, but the Lieutenant pressed on, asking, “Is there a reason you don’t get a proper replacement leg? Seems like it’d fix a lot of problems.”

Geordi cringed and started to say, “Hey Dean –”

But at the same time, Anna coldly replied, “It’s not what I want and it wouldn’t solve whatever problems you seem to think I have.”

“I mean it’d make you more, you know, efficient,” Covett said, his awkward words indicating that he finally realized he was digging himself in rather badly.

“Have you observed any specific inefficiencies on my part in the day and a half I’ve been on board? And if so, do please explain how my leg has been involved in any of them.”

“I just meant –”

“With or without the leg I am able to move about this space more efficiently than most, actually. If you mean my preference to remain seated as I am now, I assure you that sitting does not impede my output in any way.”

“I didn’t say –”

“The Andoran have six fingers on each hand. I bet they’re able to input commands on a console at a higher rate than those of us with five fingers,” she said.

Covett scoffed, “I know several Andorians and none of them have six –“

“I said Andoran, not Andorian. Andorans have six fingers. Look it up. Have you considered surgical alteration to graft a sixth finger on each hand to increase your efficiency?”

Covett recoiled in disgust. “Of course not. That’s ridiculous.”

“How is that any different than your suggestion that I have a fake leg surgically attached to my body?”

“Because two legs and ten fingers is normal for a human.”

“Not for me,” she countered. “I’ve had one leg for most of my life. I only got this prosthetic when I left the environment that allowed me to function perfectly well without it. I wear it to enable me to get around space that doesn’t otherwise meet my needs, and, frankly, so people don’t ask me personal questions about altering my body.”

Covett was clearly getting annoyed. “Hey, look –”

“I am no more a two-legged human than you are a twelve-fingered one.”

The lieutenant looked to Geordi for backup, but the latter merely crossed his arms and shrugged. Covett scoffed and walked away.

Anna glared at him as he went, then turned her eyes back to her console and resumed her work.

Geordi sighed and softly said, “Sorry about that. I wasn’t sure if I should intervene or not.”

“It’s okay. I’m used to it,” she replied.

“Yeah, I hear that.”

Anna turned her chair to face him. “I bet. Fully-formed, original-parts people are annoyingly judgmental, aren’t they?”

“Oh yeah,” Geordi replied. “I’ve had to use that same argument about my VISOR when I’m constantly asked why I don’t just get standard ocular implants or whatever other random thing they

heard about on some holonews story but have no actual clue about.”

“I’ve learned that phrases like, ‘Why don’t you just?’ or ‘Have you tried?’ are always followed by something that will make me angry,” Anna said.

“They don’t get that sometimes we like it the way we have it, even if it’s not what they think of as perfect. My VISOR gives me headaches if I wear it too long and I’m still missing some things about what I see, but I also see much more than anyone else. I don’t want to give that up.”

Data nodded. “I have used a similar argument before as well.”

“Well you can do even more than either of us,” Geordi said with a chuckle.

“No, I mean about your VISOR.”

“You used my VISOR in an argument?”

“Yes,” Data said. “I cited it as evidence to convince the captain to not allow Commander Maddox to require me to undergo his tests.”

Anna turned back to her console.

“But Data, I thought the captain argued that point himself?” Geordi asked.

“At first he believed I should consider submitting to the procedures because of what it would mean for Starfleet. I suggested that Starfleet would be more efficient if every officer had their biological eyes replaced with a VISOR system.”

Geordi whistled. “I bet he didn’t like that idea.”

“He did not. I believe it was his aversion to the very concept that prompted him to argue the case on my behalf.”

Anna cringed and muttered, “I always wondered what would make a man like that bother to help someone else. Figures.”

Data frowned, confused by Anna’s reaction. “It was not that the captain wished me to submit so much as he lacked sufficient reason to refuse Starfleet orders until I supplied him with that example.”

Anna shrugged.

Geordi leaned back in his chair. “Well, we’re all glad he defended you as he did, however he got to that point.”

Anna turned just enough to look at Data as she said, “I cited your case to force Starfleet to stop using me as an involuntary test subject myself.”

“I am aware of that, yes. I am very sorry for what was done to you, but I am glad my case provided you with assistance.”

“Hey Anna, you know that what they were doing with you, holding you like that, that was illegal anyway, right?” Geordi asked.

“I know it now, but I didn’t at the time. If I hadn’t stumbled across that case when I was hacking my way through the library, I’m not sure I would have had the confidence to demand anyone pay attention to me.” She smiled a little at Data, but it was a sad, lost expression. “I owe you a huge debt of gratitude for that.”

Data shook his head. “Not at all. I am simply pleased to have been of service without even having been aware of it.”

She turned the chair to face them both again. “You’re very kind. You both are. Why, I kind of feel like I’ve joined the secret club of people who are fine the way they are and just need others to back off.”

Geordi laughed. “I didn’t know we had a club, but if we do, you’re welcome to join.”

“Thank you,” she replied. Then she glanced over her shoulder in the direction of Covett back behind the warp core and muttered, “Mind you, some people around here could use a personality transplant.”

Geordi laughed again. “Now that sums up more than half of the engineering crew!”



After another reasonably solid sleep, Anna had once again returned to engineering during the overnight shift. She'd hoped to see Data there again, but she supposed he must've had work elsewhere or was possibly resting in whatever way androids rested.

She'd read everything she could find out about him when she'd first escaped The Institute, but then had forgotten about him until she got Geordi's first invitation to come aboard the Enterprise. That had rekindled her fascination with Data and the way various elements within Starfleet appeared to regard him in terms of his sentience and his rights, so once again she'd found all of the publicly available information she could to learn more about him.

However, since she'd drawn the line at going beyond what was publicly available – not out of fear of being caught, but rather a profound need to treat this fascinating man with the respect Starfleet had not bothered to pay her – she had little idea of his personal life other than apparently he played the violin and painted. Somewhere in one of the articles about him there'd been mention that he didn't need to sleep, but she wondered if he did anyway, or if he ever took time to simply relax and do nothing.

Either way he clearly wasn't in engineering, so she poked around on the console trying to become fully familiar with everything that she could in advance of the new warp core project looming on the horizon.

She was sitting at the usual console in Geordi's corner when she heard a soft, "Ahem," from the direction of the core. She looked up and saw one of the other engineers there, someone she'd been introduced to but hadn't yet spoken with.

"I...I...I don't mean to interrupt, but I wanted to, that is, I haven't really had a chance...it's just that..." the man stammered, but then his shoulders slumped and he sighed in defeat.

Anna felt sorry for him and felt even worse that she'd forgotten his name, so she decided to try to rescue him with an apology. "I'm sorry, I know Geordi told me your name but he told me a zillion names that first day and I've forgotten. Please tell me again."

“I’m Barclay. Reg. Reg Barclay. Lieutenant Reg Barclay. Reginald, actually, but nobody calls me that. Um, Reg. Yes, that’s me,” he said, leaning against the clear partition as if he was trying to look casual but failing at it.

Anna tried to give him a warm smile but worried it would come across too pitying, so she overcompensated with a little laugh. That made him look horrified, so she stopped and instead said, “How do you do? I’m pleased to meet you.”

“I’m not on this shift, I’m on the next shift,” he explained. “I mean the one that starts in a few minutes, so I’ve just come in. I’m not leaving. That is to say I try to be early lately because I used to always be late and I was in trouble all the time, so I’ve been trying to keep Commander La Forge happy but I never quite know if I’m doing it right, or anything right. But I’m here for the next shift, the one in a few minutes. Are you?”

She looked to the side as she parsed out his jumble of words. “I’m here for whenever I want to be here. I don’t sleep on a normal schedule so part of the deal is I come and go when I wish. But I do understand about never being sure if you’re doing things right, if that helps.”

Reg’s shoulders relaxed a little. “It does. It really does. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“Everyone was talking last night about how brilliant you are, but it’s nice that you’re nice too. Sometimes brilliant people aren’t nice, but you seem...nice. I’m saying ‘nice’ too much and now it sounds weird. Do words ever sound weird to you if you say them too much?”

“All the time. I have to avoid thinking about it or else I get caught in a mental loop!”

Reg looked at though he’d been understood for the first time in his life and was awestruck by it. “Exactly! Oh you are brilliant!”

“Um, I don’t know about that,” she replied, feeling suddenly quite embarrassed. “But it’s kind of you. Thank you.”

“I read your paper about lowering peak transitional thresholds between warp speeds and it blew my mind. It was pure genius.”

“Oh that’s sweet of you, Reg, but –”

“Sweet? Me?”

“Um, yeah. But the thing is, I didn’t actually write that paper. Dr. Cortez did. She and Dr. McLeod did, I guess, both of them, and they asked me a lot of questions but I didn’t do any of the actual writing.”

“But it was based on your alterations to the Baltimore, wasn’t it?”

“In part, yes, and some other stuff we all researched together, but it’s weird to me when people think I’ve written all of these papers when at best I’m just a consultant.”

Reg moved to sit in Geordi’s chair as he emphatically said, “Oh no, no no no, Ms. White, you can’t ever think you’re just a consultant. You’re...you...I mean the things you’ve done! The stuff you’ve built! You’re a...well you’re the Goddess of Engineering!”

“Hah! Me? Not hardly! You are very kind but no, I promise you, I’m nothing of the kind.”

“Oh but you are! And nice too! See, there it is again, nice... nice...but you’re more than nice, you’re –”

Anna had seen Geordi come in while Reg was stammering again but Reg hadn’t, so when Geordi said, “Hey Reg, that’s my chair,” the latter yelped and fell out, stumbling back into the console behind him and ending up sprawled on the floor.

Anna gasped and stood quickly to help him, almost falling over herself, catching her balance on the console.

Geordi asked, “Whoa, you okay?”

It took Anna a moment to realize Geordi was asking her, not Reg, who was scrambling awkwardly to his feet. She felt terrible at how embarrassed he looked, so she said, “I fall down all the time. It’s okay.”

Reg attempted to smile at her, but it was strained. He muttered, "I'm fine," and hustled past her and Geordi to go into the warp core area out of sight just as Data came in and approached them.

Anna sighed and sat back down. "Well, that's a first. Hi, Data."

"Good morning," Data replied.

"What's a first?" Geordi asked.

"Meeting someone even more nervous than I am."

Geordi replied, "Yeah, Reg is a nice guy but socially awkward, even for an engineer."

"Yeah, why are so many of you like that?" she asked. "I know my obvious excuse for how weird and awkward I am, but most of you grew up around other humans in actual families."

"I think it's that a lot of us can make more sense out of machines than people," Geordi surmised. "Command officers, they know how to get people to do what they want. Science types know how to get people out of the way so they can figure stuff out. But engineers? We bypass all of that to get to the technology itself."

Anna asked Data, "Aren't you basically all three?"

Data's brow furrowed in confusion. "Do you mean I am a machine, an object of research, and technology?"

"No, I meant command, science, and engineer."

"Ah," he replied. "I serve in those three capacities as well as security. I perform a variety of functions as second officer."

"So why are you in gold? Or do you change uniforms for different jobs?"

"Most of my time is spent in ops and engineering so I remain in this colour."

Geordi grinned. "Because in his heart he's one of us, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Speaking of, are you down here for this shift, Data?"

"No. I have only come to determine your plans for the EPS tests this morning. I am otherwise required on the bridge for the first half of this shift. It is my intention, however, to come back here for the second half."

“I think we need to put the EPS experiments on hold for now because we’ve got sensor maintenance coming up and I don’t want anything new messing up our readings. Why don’t I come up to the bridge with you for a bit and we can set the next few days’ schedule up there?”

“That would be acceptable,” Data said with a polite nod.

Geordi stood back up. “Hey Anna, if you want to keep mucking around with the EPS test bed, feel free, but I feel like we’ve monopolized you on it.”

“Not at all,” she replied. “I’m enjoying it.”

“Okay, but you should also feel free to check out any of the other systems, especially in advance of the core upgrade.”

“I have been, and I might do more of that today too. You have things humming along so well here that it’s not like there’s a lot of room for easy suggestions for upgrades.”

Geordi grinned ear to ear and wagged his finger. “Now that is music to my ears! Okay Data, let’s go on up.”

After they left, Anna noticed Reg was slinking around in the background, looking at her sheepishly. She didn’t know what to do or say about it that wouldn’t make the poor man feel worse, so she tried her best to ignore him for the rest of the morning.



Stardate 47124.5 (Sunday 02/15/2370, 10:37) – Deck Twelve – Sickbay

Riker exited the turbolift and began striding down the corridor in the brisk manner that was natural for his long legs, but then stopped short just before the entrance to the main ICU and Doctor Crusher’s office. He hadn’t fully intended to come down to this deck, even though he admitted to himself it was inevitable. He

tried to think of a good justification but couldn't, so he shrugged at himself and went looking for Crusher.

She was sitting at her desk and looked up as he entered. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm fine. Just stretching my legs. Thought I'd poke my head in here and make sure everything's going smoothly."

Crusher smiled indulgently. "Captain's chair can be a bit confining, can't it?"

"Something like that," Riker said as he sat down in front of her desk. "Speaking of the captain, have you heard anything from him?"

"No, but I wouldn't expect to. Why, is something wrong?"

"No, just wondering," Riker said, feeling conspicuous in the lie. "Usually he sends a message by now on his trips like these."

"Oh, I'm sure he's a happy boy digging in the dirt with his spade and bucket. He's been looking forward to this particular trip for awhile. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm probably a bit tired," he carefully admitted, realizing he wasn't going to get away with pretending everything was perfect when it clearly wasn't.

"If you need help sleeping —"

"Nothing like that. Just like you say, sitting in someone else's command chair."

"Well there's Geordi's birthday party tomorrow," she said. "That should break up the weight of command for a bit."

"You know, I'd completely forgotten about that." Riker smiled broadly. "That actually helps. Thanks!" he said as he stood.

"Glad to be of assistance," the doctor replied. "I wish every case was that easy!"

Riker nodded at her happily and strode out of the room, back to his usual gait, certain that he was overreacting to the lack of communication.



Around midday, Data left the bridge to head back down to engineering. He noticed that his scheduling matrix was starting to prioritize tasks in that area slightly more than usual, and he found that he preferred the new emphasis.

When he arrived Geordi was staring through the transparent wall of his office up at the warp core with a perplexed expression. Data stood by him to see what he was looking at, and discovered it was Anna on the upper level, dancing around with a tricorder in her hand.

Geordi glanced at Data, raised an eyebrow, and said, “The others said she’s been doing that since before I got back down here. If she hadn’t told us about hearing the engine ‘singing’ when she first came on board, I’d think she had some kind of hidden headphones on or something.”

“Hm,” Data replied. “She is...fascinating.”

“That’s one way to describe her.”

“Do you not approve?”

“Oh I approve, Data. She’s great. I just wasn’t expecting... actually you know what, I had no idea what to expect, but I never thought anyone would dance to the warp core.”

“I wonder what song she hears now?” Data mused.

“No idea. I’m a bit jealous, to be honest. It’s my engine and I’ve never heard it sing one damned note.”

“I will go ask.”

“Uh if you like, I guess,” Geordi said, but Data was already walking away and heading for the ladder.

Once on the upper level he stood watching Anna for a short time. She was taking engine readings on the tricorder and comparing something about them to information on the display panels on the walls, but even being able to follow her fingers on the devices, Data could not guess what it was she was specifically

examining. This was somewhat concerning for him, since usually he could simply watch a human's movements to glean what they were scanning for. Anna's movements were chaotic in her interactions between the tricorder and screens, and yet simultaneously precise in her rhythmic motions to the music in her head. Everything she was doing was new and interesting to him.

He approached her and asked, "May I ask you a question?"

Once she realized he was there, her whole face erupted into that enormous smile he was beginning to anticipate and look forward to at each encounter. "Of course," she replied.

"Are you once again hearing music that is not actually there?"

"Mmhm. Kind of wish I could turn this whole room into a giant, sparkling discotheque but I'm guessing that'd be against a pile of rules."

"That would not be within standard operating procedure."

"Speaking of standard operating procedure, tell me about dilithium vector calibrations."

"Which aspect of the calibrations do you wish to know about?"

"All of it. It makes no sense to me. I've never performed one and I found it in the logs while also examining the drive's previous peak threshold records and deuterium replenishment rates so I've been trying to figure out the point of the calibrations."

"Ah, that is why you appeared to be taking multiple types of readings at the same time."

"I'm not one for focusing on a single concept at a time."

"You mentioned that we may have things in common. That would be an example of a trait we share."

"Being a scatterbrain means I can visualize many integrated systems at once, which seems to either fascinate or irritate most people. But I can't see how these vector calibrations fit in."

Data nodded. "That is likely because the design specification for the new drive you helped create no longer requires dilithium vector calibrations. It would appear your unfamiliarity stems from lack of need to perform such a task. May I ask you another question?"

She laughed. “Data, I hereby grant you blanket permission to always ask me any question you like, whenever you like.”

“Hm. Thank you. That is very gracious of you. What song do you hear in your head right now?”

Anna leaned closer to him and quietly sang, “*You’re playin’ so cool, obeyin’ every rule. Dig way down in your heart, you’re burnin’, yearnin’ for some, somebody to tell you that life ain’t passin’ you by!*” She stepped back, reached out both arms towards him, pointing with both index fingers, and continued increasingly louder as if the music was bursting out of her despite her attempt to keep it hushed. “*I’m tryin’ to tell you, it will if you don’t even try!*” She held the last note for several seconds while looking at him expectantly.

“I am not familiar with that song.”

She dropped her arms, and he was concerned that he had somehow disappointed her. “It’s very upbeat and cheery and has a beat per minute rate of one-seventy-four which happens to exactly match the rhythm of our lovely drive here at warp five-point-four, so it’s been looping in my head all morning.”

“That is our standard cruising speed, so you will hear that beat frequently. My next question was going to be whether or not the songs vary, but perhaps they do not given that common tempo.”

“Some days it’s a bunch of songs all mashed together. Other days it’s just one, like right now.” She grinned at him and continued singing and dancing. “*Cut loose, footloose, kick off your Sunday shoes! Oooee, Marie, shake it, shake it for me! Whoah Milo, come on, come on, let’s go! Lose your blues, everybody cut footloose!*”

Then she laughed and wagged her right leg at him. He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Footloose, see?” She laughed at her own joke but it trailed off awkwardly, so she shrugged and sighed.

“Forgive me, was that meant to be humorous?” Data asked.

“Meant to be, yeah, but don’t worry; nobody ever laughs at my jokes.”

“Ah. That is another thing we seem to have in common.”

“Being funny is harder than it looks, isn’t it?”

“Despite my continued studies of popular culture in general and comedy specifically, I seem to be unable to deliver a joke successfully. My friends often laugh at my telling of the joke, but rarely the joke itself.”

“You mean they laugh at you?”

“Not in an antagonistic manner. The problem is that I am unable to make my friends laugh when I intend to.”

Anna nodded understandingly. “You wish people would laugh at your jokes as much as your mistakes.”

“Indeed. I know thousands of jokes but apparently they are all considered to be ‘terrible’.”

Anna crossed her arms and grinned again. “Oh? Try me.”

“You wish to hear a joke?”

“Definitely.”

“I know several music-themed jokes. Perhaps one of those would be a good choice.”

“Yes please!”

“What is the difference between a guitar and a fish?”

“I don’t know. What?”

“It is possible to tune a guitar, but you cannot tuna fish.”

Anna laughed heartily, which gave Data a profound sense of satisfaction unlike he had ever experienced before. He eagerly asked, “Would you like to hear another?”

“Yes! Although let’s go back down, I need to check some of these readings against the central console.”

As they approached the lift, Data said, “Knock knock.”

Anna giggled and answered, “Who’s there?”

“Little old lady.”

“Little old lady who?”

As the lift reached the main level, Data stood aside to let Anna get out first and then said, “I was not aware you could yodel.”

Once again Anna laughed uproariously, this time attracting attention from several other nearby engineers who looked at each

other in bewilderment. She bounced on her toes and insisted, “Do another!”

Quite pleased to oblige, Data asked, “Why did the pianist repeatedly hit his head against the piano keys?”

“Why?”

“He was playing by ear.”

She laughed so hard she made several small snorting noises in between breaths. Data instantly decided it was one of best things he had ever heard. He followed her to the main engineering central console with a bemused expression.

Geordi leaned over from his chair and asked, “Data, what the hell are you doing? Don’t break her with your jokes. We want her to stay, remember?”

“He’s hilarious!” Anna said as she started tapping the central console while also looking at her tricorder readings.

“You may be the nicest person in the galaxy to say that,” Geordi said, shaking his head.

Data’s brow instantly furrowed. “Anna, are you merely being kind with your laughter?”

“What? No! Those were funny! Tell me another, please?”

“Very well. Why did Mozart hate his chickens?”

“Why?”

“Because they kept running around saying, ‘Bach! Bach! Bach!’” Data said in a ridiculously bad impersonation of a chicken sound.

Anna leaned on the edge of the console and laughed again, her whole shoulders shaking with it.

Data said, “I have wondered about that one. Is it funny simply because of the simulated chicken sound, or did Mozart genuinely dislike Bach’s music?”

“No idea about the composers, but the chicken sounds were definitely funny.”

“No they weren’t,” came Geordi’s voice from around the corner.

Data moved to stand right beside Anna so he could quietly say, “Geordi in particular does not approve of my attempts to be humorous. Are you accessing the plasma residue maintenance schedule?”

“Yes, I’m compiling a list of the Enterprise’s standard procedures so I have an idea of any changes that might come with the new drive,” she replied. “That’s why I was asking about the vector calibrations and the other stuff.”

“I see. That is very sensible. Would you care to hear another joke?”

Anna leaned back to glance behind Data in the direction of Geordi’s corner, then grinned at Data conspiratorially and whispered, “Yes!”

Data began, “A man goes to a store to buy some kidneys –”

But Geordi shouted, “No! Not the kidneys one, Data, for crying out loud!”

Data looked to Anna, who nodded encouragingly, so he leaned in close and softly said, “The man says to the shopkeeper, ‘I would like a pound of kiddillies, please.’”

Geordi groaned loudly in protest.

Data continued, “The shopkeeper says to him, ‘You mean kidneys, do you not?’ The man says, ‘I said kiddillies, diddle I?’”

Anna laughed so hard that she had to wipe tears away from her eyes. Data was surprised that even the joke others had told him was his worst would make her laugh. It occurred to him that if he was ever able to feel elation, it must be similar to this experience.

“Oh that was good,” Anna said, fanning her face and still laughing.

“No it wasn’t,” Geordi said, which only cracked her up more.

Anna gripped the console as her laughter subsided. “I don’t know if I’ve ever laughed that hard. Thank you.”

“You are most welcome. Although I must admit, I am not entirely sure why that joke is funny.”

“Because it isn’t,” Geordi said flatly.

“I’m not entirely sure myself,” Anna said, giggling once again, “But every time Geordi says it’s not funny, it gets funnier.”

“Curious,” Data replied. He took a step back to peer around the corner.

Geordi was working at his console, but glanced up with a disapproving expression. Data shrugged at him and returned to the central console beside Anna.

“Oh, my sides hurt,” she said. “I’ve accessed the schedule for all routine maintenance but do you have any other standard procedures I should be checking?”

“That is likely. Here, I will compile a list for you,” he said as he tapped a panel quickly. “Geordi has always said that joke is too old and that I do not tell it well.”

“I haven’t heard any of these so they’re funny to me.”

“That is a reasonable hypothesis,” Data said. “There, I have completed the list and copied it to your file set so you may access it from any point, including your lab.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind and helpful. And now that I can breathe again, tell me more jokes.”

“In my attempts to learn humour in recent years, I have inadvertently acquired too many jokes that I later realized were predicated on mean-spirited themes or acts of lewdness. I have since purged many of those and found that much of what remains are basic puns. Many people seem to feel that puns are a low form of humour, but I find them to be satisfying in their simplicity. I have compiled several categories within that subset. For instance, I know several about clocks. Would you like to hear some of those?”

The groan from around the corner made Anna laugh anew. She nudged Data’s arm with her elbow and nodded at him, so he asked, “Did you hear someone is writing a book about clockmaking?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“It is about time,” Data replied.

Anna put her hand over her mouth in a failed attempt to stifle her laughter.

“Have you ever tried to eat a clock?” he asked.

“No, of course not.”

Data nodded. “You should not. It would be very time consuming. Why did the burglar rob the clock at midnight?”

“I don’t know,” she said through her laughter.

“So its hands would already be up.” Data began firing the jokes faster, thoroughly enjoying Anna’s continued laughter. “Why should you sit on a clock? Because then you will be on time. But what time was it when the targ sat on the clock? Time to get a new clock. Why should you take advice from a clock? Because it is clockwise. Are you all right?” he asked, noticing her face was very red.

“Yes, yes, but let me breathe, Jiminy Crickets,” she panted between peals.

“Perhaps I should attempt a different style. Why did the chicken cross the road?”

Anna wiped her eyes again and said, “Now wait, see, is that the one where the answer is, ‘To get to the other side’?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve heard that one and I don’t get it. Can you explain why that’s even a joke?”

“I cannot. I was hoping you would be able to tell me.”

She blinked at him, raised an eyebrow, and then once again doubled over with laughter.

“Have you discovered why it is humorous?” he asked.

“No, but you supposing I might be able to explain it is so funny that I’m getting dizzy!”

Data grew concerned. “I do not wish to make you ill.”

“You’re not, you’re not,” she said, rubbing her face. “I’ve just never laughed this much in my whole life. Oh my. Here,” she said, bringing up another screen on the console. “Help me breathe again with something boring. Then tell me more jokes. Why, this may be the greatest day of my life!”



Geordi plonked himself onto a stool at the bar in Ten Forward, sighed, and let his shoulders slump.

Guinan came over and poured him some genuine single-malt whisky. “You look like you’ve had a rough day.”

He took the glass and held it reverently between his fingertips. “It’s been a very productive day, which is great, but I had to listen to Data tell his jokes all afternoon.”

Guinan immediately put the entire bottle beside him.

Geordi laughed. “See, now that’s actually funny. I believe you’re familiar with Data’s jokes.

“Oh yes. I’m still in recovery. Why the hell would he put you through that?”

“It wasn’t for me. It was in spite of me and every other poor soul in engineering.” Geordi sipped and then whistled appreciatively. “We’ve got this new consultant and she’s...well I knew before she came aboard that she was a bit strange and it’s been clear since she got here that she’s even stranger than I thought, but what I saw today blew my mind.”

“Oh?”

“She laughs at Data’s jokes.”

“She must be very kind,” Guinan surmised.

“No, see, that’s just it. She was genuinely laughing.”

“Has he downloaded new material?”

“Nope. It’s the same painful stuff, the same terrible puns and stretched punchlines. But I guess she hasn’t heard them before, or something. There were a couple she didn’t seem to get but even then she’d grin at him and ask for another one.”

“Wait, someone actually asked for Data’s jokes? Voluntarily?”

“Uh-huh.” He took another drink. “She asked for more over and over again for nearly six hours straight.”

Guinan winced.

Geordi lifted a finger in the air. “And the thing was, they were still getting things done. It was this weird harmony of prepping for the new warp core and then he’d tell a joke and she’d laugh. And then she’d ask him about a standard maintenance procedure and he’d answer and tell another and she’d laugh. Then they’d be waiting for the computer to compile their requests so she’d ask for a string of jokes and he has an infinite supply. I tried to distract them, I tried to pile enough other things on them – way more than I have any right to do to him as second officer or her as a guest expert – but they’d babble their way through it all together like they were sharing a super-speed brain and at every pause in the tech stuff he’d tell another joke. It was constant torture but I couldn’t tell them to cut it out because they were blazing through more work I’d get done in a week!” He lifted his hands to demonstrate his surrender, and then sighed and took another drink.

“She sounds fascinating. When do I get to meet her?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? She’s made it clear she doesn’t want to mingle far outside of engineering. She might never come up here.” But then he sat up, grinned, and snapped his fingers. “But wait, it’s my birthday tomorrow.”

“Thinking of inviting her to your party in here?”

“Yeah, it’s perfect! She’ll have met most people coming, and the people she doesn’t want to meet are mostly not around anyway. I just might be able to convince her to come, especially since Data’s coming.”

“Sounds like they’re peas in a pod already.”

“Yeah, the moment she stepped on board she asked him to be her friend.” Geordi swirled the amber liquid around in his glass. “It was weird at first, but I have to admit it turned out to be kind of sweet. I think they get each other on some strange level, and he’s never really had that with anyone before. I get the feeling she hasn’t either.”

“Apparently they at least have the same sense of humour,” Guinan said.

Geordi lifted his glass. “Here’s to their friendship, and here’s also to hoping he runs out of material before I experience irreparable brain damage.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Stardate 47126.9 (Monday 02/16/2370, 07:38) – Deck Thirty-Eight
– Port Nacelle Pylon

“Thank you Data. It’s one thing to know these systems inside out in spec diagrams, but seeing them in person is really helpful,” Anna said as she and Data wrapped up his tour of the propulsion side of the warp engine and began to walk casually towards main engineering.

“It was my pleasure,” he said. “I regret that I was unable to show you the interior of the nacelle at this time beyond the control room.”

“Actually I’m pretty keen on the part where we don’t go into live field coils and get fried!” she replied with a laugh. “Nacelle bits can wait until we’re stopped somewhere. Where’s the ship headed right now, anyway? Or am I allowed to ask?”

“You may always ask. It is rare that our destination is kept secret from the general crew. We are proceeding to Starbase 247 to exchange supplies and to retrieve some personnel who have been attending a conference there.”

“So basically that’s what you all do all the time? Fly around and talk to people from different worlds and look at space stuff?”

“That is an apt generalization, yes. Your tone suggests it seems unusual to you.”

“It’s the opposite of what I worked on for most of my life,” Anna said with a shrug. “All I wanted to do was get home.”

“To Earth.”

“Yeah. I’ve never been anywhere else other than Earth and Covaris Two. The Baltimore made stops along our way but I wasn’t ever allowed off the ship. At the time I thought Mom and Captain Dager were being mean but I’ve learned since that I wasn’t supposed to be on board and I was being kept hidden.”

“So you have never visited any other planet?”

“When would I have?”

Data nodded. “Hm, indeed. You will have ample opportunity to do so now, if you wish.”

Her eyes went wide and she shook her head slowly. “Not a chance in hell,” she said, emphasizing every word.

“Why not?” Data asked, genuinely perplexed that she could be so boldly experimental about technology but so timid about exploring the planets that very technology was made to reach.

“So many reasons!” she said, drawing her arms in and shrinking back as if she was suddenly surrounded by terrible threats. “With my luck I’d end up forgotten and left behind!”

It bothered Data on a deep level to see her so frightened by a scenario that required such significant lack of concern for her wellbeing. “Anna, that would not happen. Neither Geordi nor I would allow the Enterprise to leave if you were not safely back on board. The captain would never allow any member of the crew to be abandoned in such a fashion.”

A peculiar darkness passed over her face, a sort of scowl but more pained. She shook her head and it dissipated instantly as she mustered a thin, joyless smile that Data found highly disconcerting. “That’s sweet,” she said, “but at best I’d be a disruption if I went anywhere. I know nothing of diplomatic protocols. I can barely cope with human social requirements, so I’d likely start a war with some otherworldly folks because I’d say something stupid or step on the wrong plant or do the wrong handshake or, worst of all, accidentally blurt out a bit of a song and then trip all over myself trying to fix it. I’ve met several Vulcans so I know how badly that goes. They hate me, you know. Vulcans always hate me.”

Data was confused. “Vulcans are specifically known for eschewing emotionally laden values such as ‘hate’.”

“Yeah, well, you haven’t seen the dirty looks I get from every single one I’ve been in a room with. Ensign Taurik glares at me all the time.”

“Ensign Taurik looks at everybody like that. Lieutenant Navarro calls it ‘resting Vulcan face’.”

“Well there was also the time Dr. Cortez dragged me to a conference in Boston and one particular lecture was amazing so at the end I got up all of my courage and went to talk to the speaker. I got so excited while we were talking that I accidentally sang a few words and did this,” she said, bouncing on her toes a little bit. “But then a voice behind me as cold as a block of ice said, ‘I don’t know who you are but you would do well to remember this is a professional, scientific lecture hall, not community theatre,’” she said in imitation of the deep voice. “I turned around and there were three Vulcans glaring down at me. I was reminded all over again that I never belong, I never get it right. The last thing I’m going to do is visit some strange world just to screw it all up and embarrass myself and get the whole Federation in trouble or something.”

“That was an unfortunate experience. I have observed that humans often interpret Vulcan reticence as more unkind than Vulcans intend, but those words were indeed unduly harsh. However, you should know that I have encountered many scientists who demonstrate open joy for their field, including a few who even sing and dance about it.”

She visibly relaxed and her eyes lit up at the prospect. “Really? Like who?”

“Dr. Berrie Porter is a renowned expert in multicellular pathogens who composes and performs their own operatic pieces on the subject. I was privileged to attend one of their performances at a conference last year. The USS Potempkin’s entire stellar cartography department has performed as an a-capella group singing science-themed songs for many years, going back at least as long as Commander Riker was on board because he has spoken of enjoying their concerts. Lieutenant Navarro here in engineering and her husband Lieutenant Navarro in exobiology routinely engage in competitive ballroom dancing at events around the quadrant and more than once have choreographed exquisite

routines that incorporate thematic elements of their research, although these do tend to be admittedly fairly esoteric.”

“Wow, I had no idea,” Anna said. “Do they ever perform here on board?”

“Yes. The Enterprise routinely hosts small performances of a variety of arts including music, dance, poetry, drama, and of course Ensign Davies from stellar cartography uses any excuse he can get to demonstrate his fire-breathing skills.”

“Fire-breathing?! Where is he from?”

“Omaha, on Earth. It is apparently an ancient circus act.”

“Oh, so he’s human,” she said with a laugh as they entered main engineering. “I thought maybe he was some kind of dragon-like race.”

“I believe he wishes he was,” Data said. “The next scheduled performance is in four days’ time, at 1800 in Ten Forward, a concert featuring a woodwind ensemble formed of crew members from various departments. Perhaps you should attend.”

Anna shrugged and wrinkled her nose. “Sounds nice, but that’s probably more random socialization than I can cope with just yet.”

Data nodded. “All performances are listed in the ship’s open calendar. Perhaps as you become more comfortable with various people on board, you will likewise become more comfortable attending such events.”

“Maybe.”

Geordi approached them and asked, “What have you two been up to? Don’t tell me you’ve been up all night again,” he said specifically to Anna.

“I did warn you I keep unusual hours. Data has kindly been giving me a tour of the drive systems.”

Geordi grinned. “And talking up the concerts from what I overheard just now. Watch out, if you play an instrument he’ll rope you into one of his quartets or quintets or whatever he’s got going at the moment.”

Data’s brow furrowed. “Participation in our concerts is entirely voluntary.”

Geordi laughed and shook his head. “I didn’t mean that literally, Data.”

Data’s brow lifted again. “Ah. I understand.”

“Well I don’t play an instrument anyway. I can’t even read music,” Anna said.

“But you are clearly highly interested in music and sing so well,” Data replied, once again confused.

“You are very sweet, but all I’ve ever done is belt out show tunes in my private little wreck. It’s not as if I studied any of it. I can sing passably but I can’t dance in reality the way I can in my mind because even with the peg leg all I do is trip over it. I can’t even whistle a proper tune. I’m not fit for the stage, trust me.”

Data nodded sympathetically. “Whistling is a skill I have practiced and yet still cannot adequately perform myself.”

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” Anna asked. “When you can know everything about how it works and how the notes sound but they just never come out right?”

Geordi whistled a short ditty, put his hands on his hips, and grinned proudly at each of them in turn. “Finally! Something I can beat both of you at!”

Anna laughed and applauded him. “Spectacular! Between the three of us we can form a whole vaudeville act that nobody will ever want to see: I’ll sing, Data’ll tell jokes, you whistle. *We’ll all take a bow, including the cow, though business is lousy and slow,*” she finished in light song.

“Actually Data’s quite the singer,” Geordi said.

Anna’s eyes widened as she turned back to Data. “Really? I’d love to hear you sing sometime.”

“I would be happy to oblige, given the right circumstances.”

“At the party tonight?” Geordi suggested.

“That is a reasonable possibility, especially if you wish it,” Data replied to him.

“Party?” Anna asked.

“It is Geordi’s birthday today,” Data explained.

“Oh I see. Happy birthday!”

“Save it for tonight,” he said with a brush-off wave. “You should come. Most of engineering will be there. Ten Forward at 1800.”

Anna began to withdraw slightly, and Data noticed she was once again pulling her arms and shoulders inward. “It’s very kind of you to invite me but I wouldn’t know what to do or say. I’ve never been to a party before.”

“You don’t have to do or say anything. Just hang out and have a good time.” Geordi noticed frightened posture as well and added, “It’s completely safe.”

“You’re a senior officer. You both are. Other senior officers will be there. That’s very...intimidating.”

“Actually the captain’s still on leave, Counsellor Troi doesn’t get back until we get to Starbase 247 tomorrow, Worf doesn’t come to parties unless we spring them on him directly, so pretty much that leaves Doctor Crusher and Commander Riker.” Geordi scrutinized Anna’s reaction as he added, “The commander will probably spend most of the time playing his trombone with the band in the corner.”

But instead of reacting to any information about Riker, Anna perked up a bit as she asked, “Band? A live band?”

“Oh yeah. Engineer parties are actually fun. Command parties are the stiff ones with speeches and networking. Engineers know what parties are really for: being loud and leaving all of our cares at the door.”

Anna sighed, twisting her hands before her nervously. “Maybe. It’s a long way up into that section, though. A long way back if I feel overwhelmed and need to flee.”

“If it would help, I am entirely willing to escort you to ensure you feel safe there and back,” Data offered.

The relief on her face was clear as she said, “That is very kind of you. Thank you. Okay, I’ll try to muster up the courage, then.”

“Great! Guinan wants to meet you, by the way. If that’s all right with you.”

“Who’s Guinan?”

Data explained, “She runs Ten Forward. She is an exemplary person. I am confident you will like her.”

“Okay. But for now I’m going to try to think of something else so I don’t sit worrying myself into a state over it all,” Anna said as she sat down at the console.



Stardate 47128.05 (Monday 02/16/2370, 17:43) – Bridge

“Sir, we have an incoming request from Commander Rosen from Deep Space Four,” Worf reported. “She says a Tarkanian diplomatic delegation is seeking transport to Starbase 718 when we are scheduled to be passing back this way in two weeks’ time on our mission to the Argus sector. Apparently our course suits them better than their originally planned transport ship.”

Riker grinned. “Our course or our Galaxy-class accommodations?”

“Commander Rosen has not specified.”

Riker chuckled to himself, missing Picard and Troi, both of whom would have appreciated his little joke. “Please respond to the commander that presuming our orders do not change in the intervening time, we’d be happy to transport the fine Tarkanian delegation.”

“Yes sir,” Worf said in a low grumble.

Riker wasn’t sure if Worf disapproved of Tarkanians, transporting diplomats, irreverence on the bridge, or if it was just his way of grumbling about nearly everything, but whatever it was he thought it was time to loosen his friend up. “At 1800 I’ll hand you the bridge and head down to Ten Forward for Geordi’s party. That is unless you want me to find someone else to take the bridge so you can join the party too.”

“Thank you sir, but I prefer to remain at my post,” Worf replied.

“Are you sure? And miss all the fun?” Riker said, suppressing another grin.

Worf’s slow sigh was very quiet, but since Riker knew to expect it, he could just barely make it out.

Riker added, “I’ll even play some of your favourite arias on my trombone, if you want.”

“No thank you, sir.”

Riker’s grin came out in full force and lingered for several minutes as he contemplated the relative horror of jazz versions of Klingon opera.



Anna stood at the central console in main engineering, comparing notes she’d made on a PADD throughout the day to information in the central computer. Data was nearby, performing routine inspections on several of the wall consoles, and noticed when she began to hum. He didn’t say anything because the tune was unfamiliar, pleasing, and he was concerned that if he spoke, she’d stop.

Soon she began to very quietly sing:

Anyone can whistle, any old day, easy.

It’s all so simple: relax let go let fly!

So someone tell me why can’t I?

I can fix a warp coil, change the transitional peak, easy.

I can slay a dragon any old week, easy.

What’s hard is simple, what’s natural comes hard.

Maybe you can show me, how to let go, lower my guard,

Learn to be free.

Maybe if you whistle, whistle for me.

Data found himself drawn in by the perfection of her voice and came to stand on the opposite side of the central console to observe her more closely. On the last note she looked up at him sheepishly and said, “Sorry. Sometimes I forget there are others around trying to concentrate.”

“I am entirely able to concentrate regardless of external stimuli. That was extremely good.”

She half-shrugged. “It’s how I feel a lot. It’s been in my head since this morning when we talked about whistling.”

Data tilted his head, then arched his eyebrows in understanding. “I too know what it is like to have mastery in one area yet feel insufficient in another. In some sense, that is a defining aspect of my existence. But I meant that your singing was very nice. You keep referring to your singing in middling terms such as ‘passable’, but based on what I have heard you appear to be much better than you realize.”

“That’s very kind of you, but it’s one thing to belt out a tune alone in big tin box where nobody can hear you, and quite another to be heard. I can hit most of the right notes most of the time, but I’ll never be a great singer.”

“Why not?”

“That’s for other people, I guess. You know, the type with training and a desire to be on the stage or in a recording booth or whatever.”

“I have observed that many humans long for the fame and glory that comes with great performance talents. Do you not wish for these things?”

Her eyes went wide with fear. “Hah! No! Geez Louise I couldn’t stand to have a bunch of people staring at me on purpose waiting for me to be good at something in front of them!”

His brow furrowed. “Curious. Is it that you fear failing in front of others? Stage fright?”

“I can’t even contemplate that much of it. I just can’t cope with a bunch of people looking at me. Or even being in a crowd.” Anna shuddered, and then leaned over the console to whisper, “Like this

party tonight. Part of me really, really wants to go but most of me is terrified.”

“Of what?”

She rolled her eyes at herself and tried to explain. “I grew up supposing that what I wanted more than anything was to be surrounded by people. But then once I actually got back to where the people were, I quickly realized that it’s no fun being surrounded by people who are cold, or uncaring, or sometimes even mean. The first time I found myself in a crowded city street, I nearly passed out from terror.” She shuddered again. “I’m afraid that people will laugh at me, or turn their backs, or otherwise be cruel. Singing randomly while I’m working is different because I’m not trying to impress anyone. If someone doesn’t like it I can shut up, no big deal, the music goes on in my head anyway. I have no interest in finding out how many people would boo me off of a stage.”

“The performances I told you about earlier are all entirely friendly. I have never witnessed a cruel audience on board the Enterprise, or anywhere else for that matter. Perhaps one day you will feel comfortable enough to try and see that the number of people who would boo would, in fact, be zero.”

“Well I’m not singing tonight, that’s for certain,” she said firmly.

“But you will come?”

She looked at him intensely, as if searching his face for something. Since he wasn’t sure what she was looking for, he attempted to put on a friendly expression, but being uncertain precisely how to do that he ended up appearing as if he was fluctuating between a small smile and a ridiculous grin. She laughed, and though it all remained quite confusing for him, he accepted that as a positive result.

Geordi came from around the corner and announced to the entirety of main engineering, “I guess it’s time for me to go now and pretend absolutely nothing of interest will happen in Ten Forward tonight.” The other engineers started gathering around

and grinning at each other. “See you all soon,” Geordi said, then strode out. Several crew followed him, while a few others quickly wrapped up tasks.

Anna watched him go and asked Data, “Is he not having a party then?”

“He is,” Data said.

From behind her Reg said, “It’s not really a surprise party but he always likes to pretend it is.”

She turned to him, confused. “How do you pretend something is a surprise if you already know about it?”

“That is something I have wondered for some time,” Data admitted.

Reg asked Anna, “You’re coming, right? It’s always a good party as far as parties go, which I don’t really know much about. But from what I hear about other parties this is a good one in that it’s fun, I guess, if you like that sort of thing. I mean, that is...it’s... it’s nice to join in. So everyone says. It’s important to socialize with...real people.”

“So I’ve heard,” Anna said.

“Yeah me too,” Reg replied. Then, seemingly confused by his own words, he awkwardly left.

Anna and Data remained at the central console until nearly everyone else had gone out, and it was clear that those who remained were likely staying for the remainder of the shift.

Data gently said, “You are clearly conflicted about going. I do not wish to pressure you, but Geordi and I both hope to make you feel comfortable here. He will not take offense if you do not come. We simply wish to be welcoming.”

“I want to. I’m just...scared. Sorry.”

“There is nothing to apologize for. I will do all that I can to ensure you can relax and enjoy yourself.”

She smiled at him. “You’ll be my own personal deflector dish?”

“That is a strange analogy, but I suppose apt if you are anticipating too many people coming at you.”

“That’s exactly what I fear, yes.”

“Ten Forward is quite large and there are quieter corners to be found. I will show you.”

She took a deep breath, nodded, and said, “Okay. A quiet corner sounds nice. I’ll try.”

As they began walking out, he said, “If you do not mind, I would like to make a diversion to my quarters on the way to get the gift.”

Anna froze in horror. “Gift! I didn’t even think of that! I don’t have a gift! I don’t even know how to do that!”

“It would not be expected of you. Very few people on board give gifts at birthdays. I do because I have found it to be an enriching experience to first analyze my friends’ likely needs and desires, attempt to give them something that would make them happy, and then further analyze their response.” His brow furrowed again. “It is a difficult process. I have learned that they always accept these gifts with ample displays of gratitude, but it is rare to find something they actually truly wish for. The most consistent thing I have learned is that nobody wants a picture of my cat.”

“Why not?”

“I do not know.”

They resumed walking, with Anna checking every corner and the turbolift car carefully before proceeding. Data patiently waited for her every time she paused to perform these little acts of reconnaissance, recognizing it was important for her even though he knew no threat was likely. She became extremely nervous as they stepped out of the turbolift near his quarters on Deck Two, so much so that when he opened the door to his quarters she leapt inside as if she was being pursued. But once the door closed behind them, her entire posture immediately relaxed as if there had never been any threat at all.

Anna glanced around casually and asked, “So where’s this cat?”

“Likely hiding. Spot does not like strangers.” He awkwardly admitted, “She does not like anybody other than myself and Mr. Barclay.” He opened his desk drawer and pulled out a wrapped present.

“Very pretty,” Anna said.

“I have had limited success in giving other friends paintings I have created, but since Geordi takes off his VISOR in his quarters I have always wondered if a painting would be an insensitive gift. This year, however, I had what I hope is a good idea: I located a photo of his parents from their wedding day and have created a three dimensional relief model that he can touch.”

She put her hands over her heart and said, “Oh that is very sweet!”

“Is it? I am hoping he likes it. He is very close with them but has been unable to visit for some time since they each have their own command which makes family gatherings difficult to schedule. I am hoping this rendering will give him the same comfort that I have observed photos of loved ones provide for others.”

“I can’t speak for Geordi but that’s just about the kindest gift I’ve ever heard of. I bet he’s going to love it.”

“That would be an optimal result. Shall we?” he said, indicating the door.

Once more she took a deep, resolving breath, nodded, and said, “Right. Let’s do this. Off to see the Wizard.”

Data was confused about whom she was referring to, but as she seemed keen to go, he led the way.



Stardate 47128.1 (Monday 02/16/2370, 18:09) – Dessica Two –
City of Shiloh – Unnamed Bar

Picard sighed into his drink. It was the same foul brew that every squalid pub in this wretched excuse for a city served, and it was disgusting. Some of the bars with actual names offered more

upscale beverages – one even had something that could loosely be described as “wine” if he ignored the scolding voice of his brother in his mind – but he’d quickly learned that ordering anything other than the general swill garnered unwanted attention. At first he’d thought appearing to have money might yield information, but it quickly became clear that the appearance of means attracted only those who sought to take it from him.

The only saving grace was that in the truly low-end outfits – and in a city with no high end, that was saying something – the crooked barkeeps watered the drinks down enough that he could appear to be imbibing while still keeping his head.

He had successfully rebranded himself as Galen, an antiquities smuggler available for hire. A trader in the previous watering hole had told him there was work to be found in this one, so he had slipped the barkeep an extra coin along with what he hoped were the correct phrases to have potential employers sent his way whom he could then question without raising too much suspicion.

So far he’d determined that almost nobody in Shiloh cared much about Nafir, which in one sense made things easier in that there were fewer people to question. However it also meant that asking about it made him stick out and there was little information to be found. Picard had been shocked at how many of the residents of the area were oblivious to the history around them, but then again with this level of transient population he surmised there was little reason for most of these people to care about Dessica at all.

He’d confirmed what he’d known from his general overview of Dessica Two before he’d arrived: everything was effectively run by either the Orion Syndicate or the Yridians with a tacit, vaguely profitable peace between the two. What government existed was merely a veneer of semi-legitimacy running alongside those groups and at their pleasure. He’d also discovered that while in theory everyone on the planet was affiliated with one group or the other, the truth was most people couldn’t care less and were quick to bend whichever way the wind blew around them. Apparently this had actually made it difficult for the Orion Syndicate in particular

to gain a true foothold because it turned out that organized crime required stable organization to thrive, and Dessica Two was about as organized as a windswept pile of autumn leaves.

This meant that latinum was king, making it relatively easy for a clever detective like Picard to sniff out leads, pay off informants, and end up here, hoping to be contacted by a group he believed had searched Nafir for something they believed to be of value. He wasn't certain if they were the ones who'd caused the destruction or if they'd been likewise thwarted by it, but whoever they were, they were the closest he'd come to learning what had happened and why anyone would care to obliterate ruins with no apparent commercial value.

As he sat staring into his glass, swirling it gently, a woman from a humanoid species Picard couldn't immediately identify took the other seat at his table. "I'm Vekor, and you're Galen," she declared. She had long ears connected smoothly from temple to jaw, narrow eyebrows and nose to match, and disarrayed, tall tufts of bright red hair. The instant she smiled at him, he knew she'd been sent to distract him with her aggressively attractive features. He also knew it was important to pretend that it was working to some degree if he wanted to keep her talking while still playing it cool enough to not appear the fool to her flirtatious smile.

He raised an eyebrow at her, made an overly visible show of looking her over – an action he always considered to be base and repugnant when he observed anyone doing it, especially men to women in situations precisely such as this – and then answered simply, "I am. What of it?"

"I've heard you're available for...piecework."

Picard decided to go full-throttle on this coarse aspect of the character he was building on the fly. "Depends on the piece," he replied with deliberately risqué inflection.

She attempted to react coquettishly, but he could see right through her facade; she hated doing this, and was only proceeding because someone was requiring it of her. *The Orion Syndicate?* he wondered. *No, they'd have plenty of young women in their employ*

eager to please. Vekor has all the hallmarks of a mercenary, not a call-girl. Picard decided with significant relief to cease the bogus flirtation and get to the point, in hopes that it would gain ground with Vekor on a more useful level. He leaned in and said, “You don’t want to be here any more than I do, so why don’t we both cut the bullshit and get to the point? What’s the job?”

Vekor narrowed her eyes at him, but then grinned much more naturally. “You’re not hired yet, Galen. My employer has a very particular set of requirements.”

“Don’t we all?”

She laughed. “Baran is even more particular than most.”

Picard quickly attempted to go through every rumour he’d heard over the last few days, but nothing with the name of “Baran” came to mind. He suddenly wished Data was with him with a full and accurate record of everything that had been said. But he had to push aside thoughts of his venerated crew, not only to focus on the task at hand but in case there were any sort of mind-readers around. He put on a scowl and asked, “Baran? Never heard of him.”

Vekor replied, “That’s the way Baran prefers it. Notoriety can be expensive.”

“My skill set is also expensive.”

“And what skills are in your set, Galen?”

“I’m the best handler of antiquities on this side of the quadrant.”

“Oh really? Because we haven’t heard of you, either.”

“That is the way I prefer it,” he said with a smug expression. “I let my wares speak for me. I sift through the trash heaps of the galaxy and find the true artifacts prized by top collectors.”

“Then why are you here looking for work?”

This answer he had at the ready, having rehearsed it for some time in advance. “Because my last patron was foolish enough to get himself arrested for treason against the Romulan Senate, leaving me to escape with only what I could carry. His downfall nearly dragged me along with him, but another one of my skills is

slipping through the cracks in the nick of time. I know this business, I know its pitfalls, and I know how to avoid them. Now, what is it you and this Baran fellow need done?"

"What we need is someone who can help us go through a large set of objects using a specific set of parameters," came a voice from behind him.

He turned to see another unfamiliar species: a man with a diagonally ridged forehead and lines of hair cascading back from said ridges. He had a somewhat feline quality about him, both in appearance and movements, as if he was a humanoid cat toying with a mouse.

Picard was determined not to be that mouse. "Well then you've come to the right man. I know Romulan antiquities, the latest scanning techniques, and how to get them wherever the client needs them to go."

"What about Vulcan artifacts?" the man asked as he nodded to Vekor to move and took her seat. She stood behind him, arms crossed, clearly his subordinate but not necessarily happy about that. Again, Picard found this dynamic interesting because it further indicated they were not part of the Orion Syndicate.

"Vulcan, Federation, Romulan, Klingon, any of it," Picard said dismissively, as if the rich and varied cultures of the quadrant meant nothing to him at all. "Are you Baran?"

The other man stared at him with a stony expression for a moment, and then replied, "I am."

"And who do you work for?" Picard ventured, hoping his brazenness would make him seem tough without pushing too far.

"I work for me," Baran said, but Picard could tell by Vekor's eyes that he was lying. Baran was his own man, yes, but someone was pulling his strings at the moment, and Vekor wasn't keen on any of it. *Is she his business partner?* he wondered. *No, too annoyed but cowed. Too cold to be his lover, too close to the edge of defiance to be his friend. Baran has something over her, and now someone is controlling him in turn and Vekor is irritated but required to go along with it,* Picard guessed.

“Well I’d need to know more about the job before giving it any serious consideration,” Picard said. “Where would this work take place? Here on Dessica Two or do you have a ship? Are others already working on this ‘large set of objects’ or would it just be me?”

“You ask an awful lot of questions, Galen,” Baran said with a low growl.

“My time is my own and I won’t waste it on inconsequential assignments,” Picard retorted. “If you’ve got items of value to appraise, I’m the man for the job but I need to know the job suits me.”

Baran pulled a small object out from a pocket and put it on the table between them. “Appraise this and show me you know what you’re talking about.”

Picard instantly recognized it as a “klhu’rihan”, loosely translated as a talisman that could guard “The Declared” – the self-description used by the original Romulans who had split off from Vulcan culture – from external threats as well as bring good fortune to the house where it was kept. Nearly every Romulan household had a klhu’rihan of some sort; the designs and methods of display had changed over the centuries, but the basic form and markings had stayed the same. It was not of any particular economic value, nor of any archaeological significance. This one was clearly old, but it was like being presented with an arrowhead dug out of a back garden on Earth: a lovely little bit of the past, a pleasure to touch and connect with, but not especially noteworthy.

What did catch his eye were the markings around the base; it was from Nafir. Picard had to be very careful to contain both his excitement at discovering the likely plunderers as well as his rage for what they’d done. He made a show of studying it for a moment, then looked Baran square in the eye and said, “If you’re impressed by an old klhu’rihan, you are in the wrong field.”

Baran extended his hands out sideways in an exaggerated sort of shrug. “And if that’s all you think it is, we’re done here.”

Picard noticed that two more men were now lurking nearby, clearly waiting for instructions. “It’s from Nafir, not far from here,” he said. “Early settlement style, making it about seven hundred years old, likely passed down within a household until the Romulans abandoned the area at which point it was likely forgotten along with Grandma’s other rubbish. It has no significant value I can discern without using a scanner to see if it’s hiding anything. Why are you collecting knickknacks from Nafir? Have a buyer with a keen interest in ancient Romulan dust collectors, do you?”

Baran grinned, then chuckled a little. “You know, Galen, I could almost like you if you weren’t so irritatingly arrogant. Arrogance isn’t useful to me. Results are. If I presented you with more of these ‘knickknacks’ as you call them, could you replicate the tools needed to determine if any of them have a specific terikon particle decay profile?”

“Of course,” Picard retorted, confident that he could figure it out, at least. *But what an odd request*, he thought, unsure if it was what Baran really wanted or if he was just being tested. “And what would such a service be worth to you? My fee would vary depending on where you’d need the work to take place. As I asked before –”

“You ask too many questions,” Baran snapped. “You’ll get your share when we find what we need.” With that, he made a motion with his head that summoned the others out of the shadows.

Picard had no intention of being taken anywhere he couldn’t readily track. The Enterprise wasn’t due to pick him up for a few days yet and he’d hidden his tracks very well as part of going underground to find this much information. He knew there’d be no way for his crew to find him. He decided this would have to be enough for now, and to throw the might of the Federation on these scoundrels from the safety of his own bridge.

Two of the other men reached for him and he deftly blocked the attempt, managing to get a solid punch to the jaw on the bigger of the two. But as that one staggered back, a third came into the fray.

Picard began to worry about his chances. He grabbed his glass of swill and threw it in the eyes of the third, but in doing so exposed his flank to the remaining one standing, who socked him hard, winding him.

Still, he relied on his training and stayed upright enough to swing another fist, this one landing in that third man's face. With the three men at least partially dealt with, Picard tried to leap past Baran and Vekor for the exit, but Vekor pulled out a phaser and pointed it at him. As he stepped back, one of the men on the floor grabbed Picard's leg and pulled him to the ground. Before he could even contemplate whether to attempt to get up or surrender, Vekor fired.

Picard saw the beam come at him in the slow-motion way that happens when the human mind attempts to process too many threats at once. He knew this was it, this was the end, and that he could not dodge this blow. As he felt the heat of the beam against his chest, he expected to see his proverbial life flashing before his eyes, but instead all he could think about were the people he would miss the most. He saw his mother smiling at him. He saw the faces of the family that was never truly his from Kataan, especially his beloved daughter Meribor and her little son. Finally there was Beverly, the way she always looked at him with unspoken affection, and as his entire world disappeared into darkness he regretted never having spoken of his own.

CHAPTER SIX

Stardate 47128.1 (Monday 02/16/2370, 18:14) – Enterprise – Ten Forward

In the corridor just outside the doors to the already noisy Ten Forward, Anna suddenly paused and twisted her hands nervously. Data waited patiently for a moment to see if she was changing her mind, but he could not tell if she wished to stay or leave so he asked, “Would more jokes help?”

She kept her eyes firmly fixed on the doors, but she nodded.

Data dutifully asked, “Why can you never starve in a desert?”

Anna turned just enough to look up at him expectantly.

“Because of all the sand which is there.”

Her shoulders relaxed and she smiled a little, then resolutely nodded once more and took a tentative step forward. Data guided her inside and up to an empty table at the quiet port side of the room. Most of the rest of the attendees were boisterously drinking and talking in the middle and starboard of the room, with the band in the starboard corner. He paid particular attention to her reaction as she regarded the band, looking to see if she reacted to Commander Riker, but she did not. She merely smiled nervously at the entire gathering, sat down, and clasped her hands tightly on the table in front of her.

He took the seat beside her, set the gift at the far end of the table. “Would you like anything? I would be happy to bring you food or drink so you can stay back here where it is more calm, if you wish.”

“No, I...um...no thank you. Not yet anyway. You’re very sweet, though.”

“Would you like to hear more jokes?”

She nodded eagerly.

“Perhaps, given the nature of the event, I should draw upon related categories.”

“You can tell me any joke you wish, forever and always. Your kindness is the only thing keeping me from bursting into tears right now.”

Data’s brow furrowed. “If you are that uncomfortable, we can leave.”

She shook her head. “No, I need to get better at this. I don’t want to hide away forever. I need to push myself, and having you support me like this is the opportunity I’ve always needed. It’s a party, not an inquisition. I need to learn to relax and enjoy myself.”

“As you wish. Why did the mushroom wish to attend the party?”

She laughed a little. “I know this one but I want to hear you say the answer anyway.”

“Because he was a member of the kingdom fungi.” Both her smile and laughter increased, so he proceeded to another. “A banana walked into a bar and ordered a drink, but the bartender said, ‘I am sorry, we do not serve food in here.’”

“I like that one,” she said, appearing more at ease.

“Did you hear about the restaurant on the Class D planet that failed?”

“No.”

“The food was great but there was no atmosphere. Because it was a Class D planet,” he explained, and she laughed with one of those little snorting noises again, making him smile in return without even noticing. “Two men walk into a bar. You would have thought at least one of them would have seen it.”

She blinked for a moment, but then laughed loudly when she got it, and once again Data experienced a rush of sensations throughout his positronic matrix that he could not articulate without using emotional descriptors he knew to be impossible. He began to focus so much of his attention on keeping her happy that the rest of the party faded into his background processing until he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard Lieutenant Sorenson’s

unnecessarily loud voice call out, “Commander! You haven’t sung yet!”

Data turned to him and politely replied, “The party has barely begun. I will sing later.”

“Pierson, Dern, and I need a fourth for a quartet version of ‘I Got Rhythm’ later on. Come practice with us while the band gets this jazz nonsense over with.”

Data considered refusing, but he saw Anna’s face light up at the suggestion. He asked, “Do you like that song?”

“Are you kidding? That’s both a Judy Garland and a Gene Kelly classic. It’s one of the best songs ever.”

“Hey, new kid’s got taste!” Sorenson bellowed.

Anna shrank back from the tall lieutenant’s enthusiasm, but then leaned over to Data and said, “I’ll be okay here. You’ve helped a lot already.”

“Are you certain? I do not wish to abandon you.”

“Trust me, I know abandonment and this isn’t it,” she said, a flash of sadness passing over her eyes. But then she smiled at him again and added, “Anyway, I’m kind of desperate to hear you sing. Go on, I’ll be safe right here.”

Data was conflicted; he did not wish to end the pleasant experience of making her laugh, but he very much wanted to know what her reaction would be to seeing him perform with the others. When she nodded at him encouragingly again, he went off with Sorenson.



Geordi was enjoying himself thoroughly in the thick of the boisterous bunch. Ordinarily the noise would be overwhelming, but it was a party, his party, and every once in awhile it just felt good to let go and dive into the mayhem.

He felt a hand on his elbow and turned to see Doctor Crusher there. “Happy birthday!” she said, hugging him.

“Thanks,” he replied. “Another year around whatever it is we go around these days.”

“Older and wiser, Geordi, older and wiser,” she said. She looked over his shoulder towards the port side of the room and asked, “Is that White back there?”

He turned enough to check, and then confirmed, “Yeah, that’s her.”

“I thought she was going to be hiding away. Does this mean the crew’s been doing a good job making her feel comfortable?”

Geordi shrugged. “Honestly, I’m not sure. She’s very skittish, but she seems to be making friends in engineering okay, especially Data.”

“Really?” Crusher asked.

“Yeah. She only agreed to come when he said he’d walk her up here.”

“That’s good of him, especially up here into the realm of red uniforms.”

Geordi stepped a bit further away from the throng and indicated for the Doctor to follow him so he could more quietly tell her, “Yeah, on that: I think it’s the captain she’s avoiding.”

“What? Why?”

“When I said he’s still not even on board and Counsellor Troi isn’t here either, she relaxed big time.”

“How strange. What can she possibly have against the captain?”

Geordi shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Crusher frowned for a moment, and then shrugged as well. “Well I think it’s sweet that you’ve all made an effort to reach out to her. She looks very nervous, poor thing, sitting in the corner alone. I thought about going to say hello but I’m not sure if she’d welcome a doctor’s approach yet.”

“Data was sitting with her but – oh, I see, Sorenson’s grabbed him again.” Geordi winced and then looked over to the bar at Guinan, nodding towards Anna.

Crusher chuckled. “Sending Guinan to the rescue?”

“Guinan wanted to meet her anyway after I told her about Anna laughing at Data’s jokes all day yesterday.”

“Data’s jokes?” Crusher asked incredulously.

Geordi gave an exaggerated nod and took a swig from his drink.

“Good heavens,” Crusher said. “She’s braver than I thought!”



Anna watched Data walk away and resisted the urge to wring her hands or worse, bite the first knuckle on her right hand, a habit she’d learned from the start on the Baltimore to avoid being heard crying by the irritable captain.

She shook her head against the awful memories and instead peered around at everyone having a wonderful time. Part of her wanted to throw caution to the wind and join in, but every time she’d ever been that risky she’d ended up punished for it somehow or other. So instead she watched, smiled along meekly to choruses of laughter and song, and hoped nobody other than Data or Geordi would look directly at her.

It is good to be invited. It is good to be welcome, she kept telling herself. *I have friends now. Actual, real friends who are kind and genuinely want me to be here.* But that very thought was so alien that she couldn’t quite make it real even to herself. It all still felt too tenuous, too risky.

At first, Data did keep turning to look at her, so she smiled at him every time. She wanted him to go enjoy himself, and frankly the more he fretted about her, the worse she felt. It became increasingly difficult to remind herself that she was not an imposter as her self-reassurances seemed ever more futile against her rising self-doubt.

But then a lady clad all in purple approached her carefully from her right. Anna tried not to look in case the lady was simply going

to sit at another table, but when she asked, “Are you Anna White?” Anna had no choice but to turn and answer with a little nod.

“Good. I’m Guinan,” she said, taking the seat where Data had been. “I’m very pleased to meet you.”

Anna bobbed her head and shoulders slightly and said, “How do you do?”

Guinan beamed a wide grin and Anna couldn’t help but reflect at least part of that back. There was something disarming about Guinan, enough that Anna suddenly blurted, “You have the prettiest dress and hat I’ve ever seen. It’s like you’ve caught a purple nebula full of baby stars and wrapped it around yourself and your hat is this very ship sailing through it all.”

Guinan laughed heartily. “Now that is a compliment and a half!”

Anna’s eyes went wide with worry. “Is it? Wait, was that too much? That was too much, wasn’t it? I didn’t mean to sound strange. Was it inappropriate? I couldn’t help it, you’re so sparkly and beautiful and....” She tilted her head to her left and then her right with a scrutinizing eye. “Have I seen you somewhere before?”

Guinan grinned and wagged her finger. “I’d definitely remember if I’d met someone like you.”

Anna raised an eyebrow. “That actually doesn’t answer the question...”

“Now what can I get you?”

“What? Get me? Oh, nothing. I’m fine, thank you.”

“Are you sure? Whatever you want, I’ve got it or can get it.”

“That’s kind of you but I don’t drink alcohol.”

“Doesn’t have to be alcohol.”

Anna shrugged. “I really only drink water.”

Guinan scrutinized her back. “That’s it, huh?”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for. Mind you, I do happen to make a series of chocolate milkshakes that’ll knock your socks off. But I

see your point. Those are more of a scoop thing than a drinking thing, at least as thick as I make them.”

“Oh. I...um....”

“See, there are a lot of people on this ship who come up here to de-stress after hard shifts, and sometimes they need something a lot softer than alcohol to really, truly set their sorrows aside.” Guinan leaned in closer as if she was telling a secret. “I do this thing I call the Platter of Ease. It’s seven kinds of chocolate turned into mini milkshakes ranging from the creamiest white chocolate and raspberry foam this side of the galaxy to a fudge whip that’s so dark that your troubles will get sucked into its chocotational pull, never to escape.”

“Chocotational.”

“Kid, when you get to be my age they let you make up whatever words you want. Come on over to the bar and I’ll set you up.”

Anna laughed a little and looked back towards the party. Geordi was talking to someone in a blue lab coat with amazing red hair, Data was rehearsing with the other engineers in their little quartet, and the band was still merrily pumping along. She glanced back to Guinan and asked, “Are you trying to tempt me with chocolate to lure me out of this safe, dark corner and actually join the party?”

“Depends. Is it working?”

“Almost,” she admitted.

“What would it take to nudge you over that edge?”

Anna’s smile faded. “I’m not sure. I like this dark corner where my back is to the wall so nobody can sneak up on me.”

“But if you sit at the bar, I’ll be facing you and watching your back. Of course if you’re really uncomfortable down there, I can bring you whatever you’d like up here. I’m just saying that refills are faster down there.”

“Refills? On seven milkshakes?”

“If you like.”

Anna let out a long, slow breath. “I suppose if I’m here to try to fit in, I should actually try the ‘in’ part. It’s not called ‘fitting the perimeter’ is it?”

“Not that I’m aware of, no.”

Anna looked around the room once more and wondered if sitting here was maybe an insult to Geordi on his birthday, or if people might misinterpret her hanging back as snobbishness.

She looked into Guinan’s eyes again, searching for any hint of malice or trickery, and found none. So she took a deep breath, nodded, and stood.

Guinan happily led her over to the bar and Anna went to the bar stool closest to the door. It felt safer somehow to have an escape route nearby. She intended to gracefully get on it as she’d observed others doing, but it was slightly too high for her and she foolishly tried to get on from her left side, meaning she was balancing on her artificial right leg which didn’t have much in the way of pushing up onto tiptoe by itself. As a result, she sort of tipped her backside onto the side of the stool with her full leg dangling uselessly in the air between the stool and the bar. Anna tried to recover by pushing herself up by her hands, but in her haste to not look like the idiot she felt she increasingly was, she failed to get a good grip and the stool turned out from under her. She caught herself on the bar but only just, and ended up in a semi-squat position peeking over the bar in utter embarrassment.

Guinan leaned over to see her better and asked, “Are you okay?”

Anna stood back up and said, “Um, no. I’ve never sat on one of these before. Apparently I am inept at just about everything tonight.” She wished a hole would open in the deck floor under her feet and let her fall away to anywhere but here, sure that everyone must be watching her ridiculous failure.

“Usually people fall off the stools after they’ve had too many drinks, not before they’ve even had one. You’re clearly very advanced,” Guinan said with a kind smile.

Normally Anna would take a tease like that as a stab, but there was something about Guinan that reassured her on a deep level she couldn't quite articulate even to herself. She smirked, went to the other side of the stool, and more deftly hopped up.

"See?" Guinan said as she started preparing a long, black tray of seven little glasses, each with a little spoon in front. "I knew you could do it. Turns out most things in life are pretty inconsequential once you've gotten them over with."

"Most things in my life are pretty huge and awful, until recently."

"Sounds like 'recently' is a good thing then."

"I hope so," Anna said, looking over her shoulder at the band wrapping up to the applause of the others.

"Where were you stationed before the Enterprise?"

"Stationed? Nowhere. I'm not Starfleet. I'm just a consultant here for the new warp drive."

"I see. That's probably why Geordi likes you so much. He's fussy about who he lets touch his baby. You must be quite the expert."

Anna raised an eyebrow. "Have you...read anything about me?"

Guinan shook her head. "Should I have?"

"I don't know. Most people I meet have read all about me and act in certain ways because of it."

"And I'm not doing those things?"

"No."

"You mean instead of talking to you like you're a character in a story I've read, I'm talking to you like a regular person?"

"Yeah."

"Is it good?"

"Um...I suppose it might be."

"Well then lucky for both of us I never research people in advance, because all of those stories and rumours and myths and legends, they tend to get in the way of the real person. And I'm only interested in real people."

Anna smiled.

Guinan lifted the tray up to the bar. “Here we go. Now, which do you want to go for first?”

“Jiminy Crickets this is a lot of milkshake. Wait, is the order I drink some kind of test?”

Guinan laughed, then shook her head. “You really have been put through the wringer up until now, haven’t you? There’s no test here, no right or wrong. There’s just chocolate at a birthday party.”

Anna studied the lovely line of perfect little delights in front of her, wondering if she should pick the likely best one and save it for last, or try a bit of each first and then determine an order based on that information.

“Remember,” Guinan advised, “I can refill any of them that you like. So don’t be afraid, just dive in.”

“I feel like I’m testing myself,” Anna confessed. She laughed nervously, then finally picked up the middle glass and its companion spoon and said, “This probably means I like to hide in the centre of everything where nobody will think to look. Which isn’t true, I actually like to hide where nobody can look. But let’s go with this.” She tasted a tentative sample, but then immediately took a second, much larger scoop. She rolled her eyes back and said, “That is the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted.”

“And that’s only the first one,” Guinan said.

“*If you want to view paradise, simply look around and view it,*” Anna sang softly with a chuckle as she finished that one off.

“I’ve always loved that song,” Guinan said.

As Anna picked up another little glass, she once again felt like there was something intensely familiar about Guinan. She was about to press the matter further when all of a sudden Guinan was looking at something else behind her, so Anna turned just in time to see a very large man in a red uniform approaching with an enormous grin. He was so tall that when he sat down on the stool next to Anna, he did so by passing his leg entirely over the stool first.

“Well hello. You’re new here,” he said, his grin widening in a way Anna had seen before on other men’s faces and instantly loathed.

“Commander,” Guinan said with her own pointedly polite smile. “If you don’t mind, I’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

He raised his hand and said, “No, that’s fine, I don’t need anything. I simply wanted to welcome our new prodigy aboard.”

Anna was frozen in place. His “prodigy” quip told her he knew who she was, and she recalled the pictures she’d researched before coming aboard; he must be Commander Riker, the first officer of this ship, serving directly under Picard, and being in that position he undoubtedly knew exactly why she’d requested to not be approached by command staff. Yet here he was, still grinning, seeming to expect some sort of reply from her. She couldn’t breathe amidst her shocked anguish, let alone speak.

“That’s kind of you, Commander,” Guinan said, stressing the title more than before, “but Ms. White and I were in the middle of something.”

“I can see that,” he said, pointing at the tray.

Anna felt as if she was about to throw up what she’d had of it already.

Riker continued, “But since you’re up here, I figured this is a good chance to make sure the crew is doing a good job of making you feel welcome, since you had a lot of particular needs.”

Anna’s blood ran cold all over again. Somehow she found the strength to ask, “So then you know I didn’t want to have to talk to anyone in command.”

He laughed. “Well yes, but we’ve never met before so it can’t be me you’re avoiding.”

He knows, she thought. Picard has told him and he’s mocking me because he knows. I’m a joke to these people. What the hell was I thinking coming here at all? She stumbled backwards off of her stool, nearly falling over again but gripping the edge of the bar for support. “This was a mistake,” she said aloud. “I’m a mistake.”

Riker looked confused, and was just about to respond when the lady in the blue lab coat with the red hair she'd noticed earlier swooped in, took the commander by the arm, and pulled him away with a hiss of, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

As relieved as she was to have that brash grin removed from her presence, the whole encounter had set Anna into a cascade of spiralling self-doubt and panic. She heard Guinan saying something that was supposed to be soothing, but the words were distorted and she began to feel dizzy. From across the room she heard Riker say, "What? I was just being friendly!" and could see that the lady in blue was chastising him, but she couldn't make out her words.

"Oh come on," Riker said. "If she doesn't want to talk to people, Ten Forward isn't the place to be."

He's right, she thought. *He's horrible but he's right*. "I have to go," Anna said, trying to turn towards the door but unable to make her feet turn in the right direction.

"Look, I don't know what's going on here, but you can sit back down. It's fine," Guinan said.

"But I didn't even do anything!" came Riker's voice through the din that was beginning to drown Anna's mind, pounding at her ears louder than it had seemed moments before.

"I shouldn't be here. I don't belong here," Anna said, her own voice seeming like it was coming from outside of her head.

"Hey now, I'm the only one who gets to decide who belongs here and who doesn't, and I say you belong here as much as anybody else," Guinan said.

Anna shook her head, which she immediately realized was another terrible mistake because it made the whole world wiggle like a bag of water. She squeezed her eyes shut and wished it was possible for humans to squeeze their ears shut too, desperate to block out all sensation until she could find her footing and escape.

"What is wrong? Are you ill? May I assist you?" came a familiar voice to her left. Anna made herself look up: it was Data, his brow furrowed in concern. The sight of him made her want to

burst into tears, but she didn't dare, not with Riker across the room rolling his eyes and crossing his arms at whatever the lady in blue was saying to him.

"I'm so sorry," she replied to Data. "I can't be here. I tried, I really did, but I can't do this."

"I am sorry I did not stay with you. What has happened?"

"No, you shouldn't have to be stuck with the likes of me. I'll go." Anna started stepping backwards towards the door.

"How about I bring this tray back up to that cozy corner table?" Guinan offered.

"No, sorry, I have to go. I'm so sorry."

"I do not understand why you are apologizing, nor why you feel you must leave, but if you are uncomfortable here I will escort you back to your quarters," Data said.

"I don't want to be any trouble."

"You are not."

"You should stay and enjoy the party."

"You only agreed to come after I assured you that I would escort you here and back so you would not have to—" Data looked over his shoulder at Riker, then looked to Guinan, and then back to Anna. "Has Commander Riker said something to you? Is that why you are upset?"

"I can't do this," Anna said weakly, finally able to turn around and head for the door.

But as she stepped out to the corridor, Data was at her side. "I believe there has been a misunderstanding. Perhaps Commander Riker did not realize who you were."

Oh he knows exactly who I am, Anna thought bitterly.

Data continued, "Nonetheless I can see you are upset, and I apologize sincerely for allowing this to occur. I should have made it clear to him when we arrived. If you do not wish my presence, I would understand."

Anna shook her head. "I don't blame you. I blame myself for being so stupid as to come up here at all."

“You are not stupid. This has been an unfortunate mishap. Please allow me to escort you back to where you feel safe. It is important to me that you not feel abandoned.”

Data’s desperate attempts at kindness were in such stark contrast to Riker’s blatant aggression that she could feel tears pushing at her eyelids and knew she wouldn’t be able to contain them for long. She nodded, then kept her head low as Data led her to a turbolift. Once inside, she whispered to herself, “Twigs and strings, twigs and strings, twigs and strings.”

Data gently asked, “Do you require twigs and strings?”

Anna shook her head. “It’s one of the few memories I have of my Grandmother. I got really upset just as we were about to leave Earth, and she told me that whenever I get overwhelmed by sadness but can’t show it or need to keep control to get something done, I should imagine in my mind that I’m collecting all of the bits of twig and string I can find inside of me to hold me up until I can find a safe place to cry it out later. And I really do not want to cry in this turbolift.”

“Ah, I understand. It is a ‘coping mechanism’.”

“Yes.”

The turbolift stopped and Data led the way out. At her door he asked, “Would you like some company? If you need to talk, I will stay with you as long as you wish.”

Anna was so humbled by his kindness that she couldn’t even look at him. She shut her eyes and shook her head. “No, thank you. You have been very kind and I’m so desperately sorry for ruining everything.”

“Nothing is ruined. I am simply concerned for you.”

“You are so kind,” she repeated, acutely aware that she was saying it too often. “Geordi is too and I’ve been so rude leaving his party like that. Please tell him how sorry I am, and that I hope he has a very happy birthday,” she said as she barely managed to enter the code into the panel beside the door. “I’m going to hide away in here now and try to pretend none of this happened.”

“If you wish,” Data said. “If you need assistance at any point through the night, please do not hesitate to call on me. I do not sleep, so you will not be disturbing me.”

Anna put her hand over her eyes to cover the start of her tears, said, “Thank you,” quickly, and then went inside before he could see. The doors closed behind her and she ran to the sofa, where she kicked off her leg and sat curled up, sobbing into her crossed knees, questioning every choice she’d made that had brought her here. Her stomach kept lurching as it always did when she was stressed, so after the sobs subsided she went to the replicator for a glass of water to try to calm it down. There, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the replicator screen.

“Look there she goes that girl is so peculiar,” she sang in halting words between ragged breaths. *“I wonder if she’s feeling well? It’s a pity and a sin, she doesn’t quite fit in...but I’m no Belle. I’m just the garbage I’ve always been.”* With that she realized her battle was lost, so she hopped to the toilet just in time to throw up, heaving well beyond the contents of the tiny little milkshake until she collapsed against the wall in a fresh bout of tears.



Data stood in the corridor outside of Anna’s door for several minutes, unsure what would be an appropriate next course of action. He calculated various probabilities to try to guess what had gone wrong, and decided it was unlikely that Commander Riker had said anything particularly unpleasant but that his mere approach had done exactly what Counsellor Troi had warned about in terms of failing to respect Anna’s wishes. But he remained confused as to why the Commander would have done such a thing, and why Anna would react so viscerally.

The trickier calculation was whether or not to call at her door to ensure she was all right. Several of her words and actions indicated strongly that she wished to be left alone, but he questioned if this was because she mistakenly thought he would judge her harshly for her emotions and was thus unnecessarily embarrassed, or if she genuinely needed space to process the events in her own time. He had observed his human friends often saying at first that they did not wish company during a stressful time only to then turn around and request company after all, and he could not pin down any logical set of indicators as to whether he was expected to press on or leave people be.

Further, he considered himself at least somewhat responsible for having left Anna's side at the party, even though there had never been any agreement that he would stay with her the entire time. He had wanted to stay with her, and realized that his own preferences were at play here; if he was able to feel guilt, he knew he would be feeling it right now but that it would also be misplaced. He did not know how humans possibly sorted all of these tangled notions out.

Data also considered the wishes of others in this series of events. He had stepped away from Sorenson and the others mid-lyric when he had observed Anna backing her way towards the door. It was not appropriate to make a commitment to a performance and then break it, and he calculated a high probability that they were waiting for him back in Ten Forward. He also had not yet given the gift to Geordi, and ultimately this was supposed to be his best friend's birthday party. By standing in the middle of a corridor on Deck Thirty-One instead, was he letting down a friend?

Ultimately he decided the best course of action was to return to the party. This would satisfy the most people, including at least one of Anna's expressed wishes that he return. He also decided that he would return here in the morning to check on her and hopefully ease any lingering unhappiness she may be experiencing at that time.

Data turned on his heel, re-entered the turbolift, and headed back to Deck Ten.

As soon as he was back in Ten Forward, Sorenson and Pierson took ahold of his arms in a friendly, cheerful manner and marched him up to the stage. He put on a performance-appropriate smile and they sang their song to a highly appreciative audience who lifted their drinks in celebration. He took the opportunity to visually scan the room and determined that Commander Riker and Doctor Crusher had both left before his return.

After the song, he engaged in multiple conversations of the “small talk” variety that he had been practicing for some time, assisted several tipsy co-workers to comfortable and safely seated positions, and at the appropriate time gave Geordi the gift. Geordi was clearly very moved by the three-dimensional portrait and thanked him profusely. He marked it in his memory as one of the most successful gifts he had ever given.

Throughout the evening Data maintained an expression of pleasant social joy, completely hiding the fact that a significant portion of his background processing was still focused on Anna. He reflected upon their first few minutes when she had arrived in the transporter room and asked for his friendship. His response had been intended as general politeness, but he now realized it might have been a profoundly meaningful moment for her. He calculated the probability of her ever having had a friend before – given her lengthy isolation and subsequent poor treatment – and realized it was a low probability indeed.

This made him realize what a significant honour and responsibility it is to be amongst someone’s first friends. He recalled all of the times he had felt out of place, looked upon by others as not requiring kindness and thus treated unkindly, and spoken of openly to his face as an unfeeling object. Though the unfeeling part was technically correct, he had nonetheless always been fully capable of recognizing the dark implications of being treated as such, and how important it had been to him to find

friends who genuinely cared for him regardless of his inability to directly reciprocate in the same manner.

As his crewmates partied all around him, he saw himself as part of the celebration because he knew he was valued for his presence by many, if not all, of the people there. He reflected upon the multitude of experiences that had taught him to see the Enterprise as his home and how deeply meaningful that realization had been. When he had first expressed that sentiment to Counsellor Troi, she had hugged him, and that act of affection had been important to him regardless of his lack of emotion or human-style tactile sensation. She was his friend; he knew her touch had been an indication of that, and he treasured that memory.

Data decided it was not right that Anna had gone so long in her life without similar friendship. Though he had only known her three days, he believed her to be a kind, good person, and his ethical and moral programs compelled him to make a direct effort to ensure she felt the same level of friendship that he had been granted throughout his years on the Enterprise. He was still experiencing significant remorse for his inappropriate actions while under the influence of Lore a few months prior; the readily-given forgiveness from Geordi and the others had inspired him to bolster his ethical programming to not only better protect it from external tampering, but also give it higher priority in directing future personal decisions.

A few hours later when he took the captain's chair for a bridge duty shift overnight, he reflected upon how often Captain Picard had defended him, guided him, and been there for him. There had been times where Data had been required to lay bare the inequities Picard and Starfleet as a whole had dealt him, but the captain had always come around to his side.

As was so often the case, Data found himself laying out a course of actions in his mind based heavily on what he imagined Captain Picard would do or advise. Though he still suspected Anna disliked the captain for some reason – in spite of her reaction to

Commander Riker this evening as well – he still saw Picard as a primary figure within his moral compass.

And so amidst his bridge duties, Data computed a series of plans to be for Anna what Captain Picard and all of his other friends on board had always been for him: understanding, welcoming, protective, supportive, reliable, trustworthy, and above all else, kind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stardate 47129.2 (Tuesday 02/17/2370, 03:47)

The first thing Picard became aware of was a dull ache in right side of his neck that radiated up through his head, making his own pulse feel like little stabs against the back of his right eye. He held his breath and didn't dare open his eyes until he rediscovered the coordination needed to bring his hand up to his face and check for Borg implants on the side of his head. Finding only his own skin there, he moved his hand down to the source of the ache and realized something had indeed been attached to his neck. He resisted the urge to pull it off, reminding himself firmly, *Resistance is never futile.*

Still with his eyes closed, he listened for any sign of movement nearby and found none, though he could tell from the hum all around that he was on a ship traveling at warp. Tentatively he opened his eyes and immediately acquiesced to another defensive habit: he counted the lights in the room. There were six. He counted again to be sure. *A formation of six triangular lights forming a rectangle covering the ceiling of a small room. Six lights. There are six lights here. I am Jean-Luc Picard, I am a Starfleet officer, I am human, and there are six lights in this room.*

He carefully sat up, feeling somewhat disoriented but certain of the things he needed to be certain of. He'd learned to hide his compulsion to count lights from both Deanna and Beverly because if they knew about it, if they realized this was why he now needed to shut off all lights in order to sleep, if they had any inkling how often he woke in that dark room checking his face for implants, they'd make him talk about any of it, all of it, and that was the last thing he could cope with.

Suddenly he remembered that he'd been shot with a phaser and his hands flew to his chest. He checked himself over for injuries

but found none; not so much as a scorch mark on his clothes. He was confused at his lack of injury, so he was extra cautious as he leaned on a nearby table to pull himself up off of the floor.

Just as Picard was examining himself more thoroughly, the door opened and Vekor sauntered in with a nasty grin. “Hello Galen,” she said in a mocking tone. “Had a good nap? Because it’s time to get to work.”

“Where the hell am I? What ship is this? What’s going on?” Picard demanded.

Vekor laughed at him. “Baran’s right. You do ask too many questions. Let’s just say you’re hired.”

“Hired?! Press-ganged more like!”

Vekor shrugged. “Call it what you will. None of us want to be here, but we’re going to be richer for it when all is said and done. And what you need to say and do right now is that you’re going to be a good boy and set up a test procedure in our cargo bay to go through our artifacts and find any that match the terikon particle decay profile we’ve got all neatly laid out for you in your instructions down there. So are you going to behave, or do you need to find out the hard way what’s been added to your neck there? Because Baran loves any excuse to press his remote button and make us scream for his pleasure.”

Picard touched the implant again, and once more Vekor laughed at him. “Don’t try to remove it! You’ll die if you do.”

He noticed she had one as well. “And you willingly submit to this obscenity?”

“Willingly? No, I wouldn’t say ‘willingly’. More like, ‘I accept the inevitability of my situation and will do whatever I need to do in order to survive.’ I suggest you do the same. Come on, I’ll show you where you’ll be working.”

Picard decided he needed to play a long at least a little for his own safety, such as it was, and that there was still a chance he could stay on Vekor’s good side enough to placate her and get her to spill occasional secrets. *If her loyalty to Baran stems solely from these implants, she may even be eager to let information slip out if*

she thinks there's hope of overthrowing him, he calculated. I need to appear belligerent enough to remain believable, but grudgingly deferential enough to Vekor to make her want to indulge me if she thinks it will suit her own self-interests. With that plan in mind, he glared at her but followed her out of the small room and through the ship to a cargo bay.

Once there, she showed him the bins full of artifacts – all labelled in an alphanumeric manner that meant nothing to him, at least not yet – and she pointed to a PADD on a nearby table. “Your instructions are on there, including the profile Baran is looking for. You have a tool replicator in the corner over there, and don’t bother trying to make anything resembling a weapon because there are safeguards against that and it’ll go really badly for you. The faster and better you work, the less pain you’ll have in any sense of the word. So get to it, Galen.”

Picard looked around the room, pressed his lips together, then made a show of a resolute shrug. “Am I at least allowed to know the name of the ship?”

“It doesn’t have a name. Ship names are for Federation bookkeepers and Klingon glory-hounds. Mercenary work requires a quieter profile.”

“The kind of quiet profile where you fire a phaser at a man in the middle of a bar?”

Vekor laughed again. “It wasn’t a regular phaser, you idiot. It’s a transporter. We use them to gather items quickly from archeological sites so we can be in and out before anyone realizes. Behave yourself for long enough and Baran might let you play with one. But for now,” she said as she picked up the PADD and shoved it at his chest, “you’d best get started and show some results before Baran decides you weren’t worth the effort and just gets rid of you entirely.”

Picard was actually quite keen to read the information on the PADD to try to glean the bigger picture of what was going on, but he feigned marginal interest, sighed, and started gathering what he needed. Vekor hung around long enough to watch him order up

several archaeological scanning devices from the replicator, and then left him to continue on his own.

He realized this was definitely the key to getting through this: pretend to acquiesce just enough to keep them off his back until he could somehow get word to the Enterprise or any other Starfleet entity. Picard had not planned on being involved at this level nor for very long, but now that he was stuck in both he was determined to make good of it and bring these mercenaries to justice.



Stardate 47129.9 (Tuesday 02/17/2370, 09:55) – Enterprise – Deck Thirty-One, Room 5435

Outside the door to Anna's lab, Data once again found himself standing in a corridor weighing several options on how to best be a helpful friend. He knew Anna was in this room because he had checked her location with the computer before coming down; despite her not having a combadge as a full crew member would, the computer still knew her whereabouts based on her door entries and use of any touchscreen. Part of him also pondered if he should push the issue of getting her a combadge as it was well within his usual purview as Chief Operations Officer to request this clearance from the captain. But the captain was not on board and Data did not wish to overstep Geordi's authority with engineering personnel, so he set aside that particular mental query and went back to focusing on the immediate decision at hand: should he activate her door chime or leave her be?

He considered several potential outcome scenarios and calculated various probabilities within each before ultimately deciding that proactive friendship was more desirable than passive pleasantries. Data rang the chime but there was no answer. He

waited what seemed a socially appropriate amount of time and then rang it again, in case she had not heard the first one. Still, there was no answer.

Several new possibilities occurred to him and he did not like most of them, so he spoke into the split between the doors, “Anna? Are you all right? It is Data. I will leave you alone if you wish but I am concerned you may be injured in there.”

A voice called, “Enter,” and the doors opened, so Data stepped inside. Anna was sitting at the central table with an entirely disassembled shield modulator before her. She had a hyperspanner in her hand and looked very tired and perturbed.

“I am sorry to disturb you,” Data said. “But I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

She smiled, but it was far from the joyful one she often served him. “You’re kind, as always, thank you. I am fine, I just wasn’t sure who was ringing. I’m mucking around with this. I don’t like how modulators work. I mean they work, but I don’t like it and I want to make it better.”

“In what manner?”

“I’m not even sure. It’s one of those things I poke at when I’m otherwise frustrated. I have a long-term goal of producing stable multi-phasic shields.”

“Interesting. A laudable goal.”

She sat back in her chair. “By which you mean a likely impossible goal that a lot of other people have beat their heads on and come up with nothing.”

“No, I meant it is laudable. It is also fraught with difficulties, but nonetheless laudable. However since you are unlikely to achieve this goal today, may I interest you in a nacelle tour now that we have docked at Starbase 247? Our stay here will only be until 1400, so the window of opportunity is small.”

Anna nodded. “I heard the ship-wide announcement about making sure to be back on board by that time. Not that I have any intention of straying far myself, like I told you before.”

“Indeed. Although to see the interior of the nacelle, we will require a shuttlecraft to dock with the access port. It is an extremely short flight from the shuttlebay, and entirely safe.”

She put down the hyperspanner. “I had planned to mope in here all day and feel generally embarrassed about last night, but I really do want to see inside a real Galaxy class nacelle.”

“There is no need for embarrassment. Engineering will be quieter than usual today due to fatigue amongst the party attendees. Further, I do not think anyone other than Guinan, Doctor Crusher, Commander Riker, and myself even noticed you were upset, as nearly everyone else was facing the opposite direction. I only saw the last moments myself and remain confused as to what happened.”

As she stood and put her leg back on, Anna said, “It was just... never mind, it’s done with.” She waved her hand dismissively at the topic, though it was clear from her expression that she remained angry about something. She put on a veneer of a happier mood and said, “Show me a nacelle, then, please. I’d really like that.”

“Port or starboard?” he asked.

“Oh...um, we saw the port side for the conduits, so let’s do the starboard nacelle just for imaginary balance.”

“As you wish,” he said and led the way out.

As they entered the turbolift she tentatively asked, “So did Geordi like the gift you made him?”

“He did, very much. I believe his reaction was indicative of being quite moved.”

“That’s good. And did you sing?”

“Yes. Though I respected your desire to leave, I missed you during the performance since you indicated you like that song.”

She smiled wistfully. “I’m sorry to have missed it. I really wanted to hear you sing.”

“I could sing a portion of the song for you now, if you wish,” he said as they exited out into the massive shuttlebay on Deck Four.

“That’s sweet, but – oh my!” she exclaimed at the sight of the enormous bay filled with shuttles and related equipment. “The entire Baltimore could have fit in here!”

“Technically we could accommodate Aerie class and several other small ships in this space, yes, but we would only do so if the need was dire, as there is insufficient room elsewhere to store all of our shuttlecraft. A very good pilot can fit three in each of the cargo bays – if the bays were empty – but that would still not accommodate this multitude,” he said, pointing at the many and varied shuttlecraft in the hangar.

“Why do you need so many? Do that many of you actually fly off at any given time?”

“There are times when most of the shuttlecraft are signed out by personnel connecting to other ships, and occasionally we require multiple shuttlecraft to get crew or equipment up and down from a location where we are precluded from using transporters, but it is indeed rare for all shuttles to be in use at once. Generally speaking they are on a maintenance rotation. Today we will sign out a Type 15 to go to the nacelle.”

“Ooo, my favourite kind,” she said with a little laugh.

“Yes, the same you had on the Baltimore. Geordi likes to claim you strapped it to the back of your ship to fly the other way, though I am aware he is grossly oversimplifying.”

As they reached the stairs up to the central shuttlebay control room, she became more relaxed and laughed more freely. “He’s not that far off. My welding techniques were a bit on the fly and far from pretty.”

“And yet, you succeeded. You are extraordinarily talented,” Data said as he entered the control room.

Anna put her hands over heart at his kind words, and then followed him inside.

“Greetings, Lieutenant Hale. I would like to take a 15 over to the starboard nacelle.”

A heavysset older man with a pinched nose replied, “All right, Commander, but there’s no scheduled maintenance for the nacelles at this stop.”

“Understood Lieutenant, but I intend to give Specialist White a tour as a prelude to the forthcoming new warp core.”

Anna suddenly looked behind her, as if waiting for someone else to arrive.

Hale shrugged, tapped his console, and said, “The Curie is now marked for use at your discretion, sir.”

“Thank you Lieutenant,” Data politely said, then indicated to Anna to head back out of the control room. On the stairs back down he asked, “Are you certain you wish to go? You appeared alarmed for a moment.”

“What, up there? You confused me because you said ‘Specialist White’ and like I told you, I don’t know who that is. I was suddenly waiting for someone else to join us.”

“Ah, I see. I felt it inappropriate to address you casually in front of an officer outside of engineering. I hope you do not mind.”

“Oh no, not at all, I’m just easily confused by my own name. Real genius over here.”

Having arrived at the assigned shuttlecraft, Data turned and regarded her with a furrowed brow. “But you are a genius.”

Anna shrugged. “I’m smart enough to get by, but I honestly think it’s really that I’m so outside normal human experiences that I can’t help but come at problems in unique ways that get interpreted as genius when all they are is...alternative, I guess.”

“You appear to do that as well, but your processing of information and subsequent output exceeds standard human abilities. I understand the concept of humility and why some humanoid cultures value it, but it is unnecessary with me.” He opened the shuttlecraft door and indicated for her to step inside.

As she passed him, she said, “I can’t decide if you’re good for my self-esteem or going to give me a swollen head.”

“The first would be the preferable result,” he said as he stepped inside as well and sat down. “Although I am aware that the latter is a metaphor.”

“Well, yes, and let’s keep it that way. No explosive decompressions out there, right?”

“That is highly unlikely at any time, particularly given the very short nature of this flight,” Data said. But then he noticed she was gripping the sides of her seat, white-knuckled. “Are you feeling apprehensive? Once again, you appear unduly alarmed.”

“Hm? Oh. I just get nervous about crashing any time I’m in a small craft.”

“We will not crash. And if there was any malfunction with this shuttlecraft, Lieutenant Hale would see and beam us back aboard. Would it help reassure you if you took the controls?”

Her eyes went wide with horror. “Oh hell no! I flew once because I had to and all I did was point myself in the right direction and activate the autopilot. I never even had to make a course correction. I have zero desire to ever pilot again, thanks.”

“You are welcome,” Data said as he began the pre-flight sequence and failed to notice her confused expression at his reaction.

As they circled around to the fore end of the nacelle, Anna looked towards the ship and gasped.

“Is something wrong?” Data asked.

Anna shook her head. “No, sorry. I just realized I can see into my quarters from up here.”

Data glanced towards the stardrive section. “Hm, yes. Does that bother you?”

“I’d convinced myself it was safe and nobody could see in.”

“It is safe,” he said as he began to dock with the nacelle’s hatch. “We are far enough away that nobody would be able to discern any detail. If you look, you can see movement in some other windows, but even I cannot accurately identify any given personnel at this distance.”

“I suppose,” she said, sounding unconvinced.

Data was not sure how to reply to that, so instead he dutifully reported the docking back to Lieutenant Hale, who replied with a very bored-sounding, "Acknowledged, sir." Data then opened the joined hatch and stepped through.

Once inside the nacelle, Data said, "Be careful. There is a raised edge to the docking port. Do not trip over it." He extended a hand back into the shuttlecraft to assist her.

Anna froze, staring at his hand as if she was not quite sure what to do about it. Data could not fully interpret her expression, but as the seconds ticked on he realized his casual offer of physical assistance was anything but casual to her. He did not know if he should withdraw his hand, if he had offended her since she was so adamantly independent about her mobility, or if perhaps it appeared that he was being inappropriately forward. But the way she was staring at it indicated she was considering taking it, and he did not wish to ever be so rude as to revoke an offer of kindness. So he stood very still, waiting for her to decide what to do next.

Very slowly, tentatively, Anna stepped forward and raised her hand to his. Then she looked at him in earnest, searching his face for something, but he did not know what it was or how to approximate an appropriate response. All he was certain of in that moment was that he wanted very much for Anna to feel safe and to know that all was well.

She turned her eyes back to their hands as she slid hers over his palm. He waited a moment, then carefully closed his fingers over the back of hers and let her lean on him as she stepped over the docking port ridge. Once inside, she did not let go, so he did not either. She looked up at him and said, "Thank you."

Data nodded, acutely aware to the nanosecond of how long their hands had been joined. When she finally let go, he recorded the entire event directly into his long-term memory, though he was not certain why.

Anna laughed nervously and stepped back from him, further along the walkway between the Bussard collector at the tip of the nacelle and the warp field coils that made up most of the length.

She crossed her arms over herself as if she was cold and looked around. “Wow, I’ve never been inside a nacelle before. The Baltimore’s were so much smaller. I mucked about in them but only up to my elbows, really. It’s got that smell in here, doesn’t it? That way metal has of smelling like it’s just been really hot?”

Data sniffed the air. “Ah. Yes. I understand.”

She skipped over to the railing and looked through the field coils to the control room on the other side. “Nobody’s over there.”

“I believe the crew who would usually be at that post are engaged in other tasks since the system is currently shut down. It is perfectly safe, I assure you.”

“Oh I know. I just kind of wanted to wave at someone. Is that weird? That’s probably weird.”

“Would you like me to request that someone go to the control room?”

Anna laughed, “No, no, of course not. But you’re endlessly sweet to offer.” She pulled a tricorder out of her pocket and said, “Let’s get down to it, then. I want to take about a zillion readings, only about half of which are for legitimate professional reasons.” She conspiratorially whispered, “The other half are for pure love of all of this stuff.”

“If you wish,” Data said as he watched her happily bounce around the small space, continually turning to smile at him for reasons he did not understand but thoroughly appreciated nonetheless.



Stardate 47130.5 (Tuesday 02/17/2370, 15:10) – Bridge/
Observation Lounge

As soon as Counsellor Troi walked onto the bridge, Riker stood from the command chair and said, “Good, you’re here. How was your conference?”

“Very productive, thank you. I managed to network with some people regarding a few tricky cases I have on my plate, so I feel a lot better about moving forward on those. I got your message that you wanted a senior staff meeting this afternoon, so as soon as I was back on board and put my things away, I came right up. What’s wrong? You’re worried.”

He attempted his usual smirk but it fell flat. “Sorry for rushing you into it so fast, but yeah. I need you. Come on,” he said, heading to the Observation Lounge and summoning the other senior officers as he went.

In a few short minutes they were all assembled, looking to Riker patiently. He stood behind the end chair and put his hands on the back, almost like they were the shoulders of a friend. “Technically I should be sitting in this chair with the captain gone, and usually I wouldn’t mind,” he said. “But something is wrong. I can’t sit here right now, and to be honest with all of you – and only you – it feels wrong to be sitting in his chair out there too.”

“But Will, you’re in charge until he’s back later this week,” Troi gently replied.

“Yes, and like I said, usually I’m fine with that. But I can’t shake the feeling that something has happened. I keep trying to brush it away, but something in my gut is telling me over and over again that he’s in trouble. That’s why I called this meeting. I need to rely on all of you to figure out if my gut is right, or if I’m just losing my damn mind.”

Crusher offered, “I’d be happy to run some scans, but you aren’t behaving in a manner I would immediately characterize as medically concerning.”

“Exactly,” Troi agreed. “I can tell you’re very worried but you don’t seem clinically pathological in any way. Why don’t you explain to us what’s bothering you?”

Riker sat down in a chair by the window, beside the end spot, leaving it eerily empty. “He’s gone on trips like this before, but he’s always checked in. Always. He can’t help himself; either he’s fishing for a report about his ship or he’s gleefully showing off whatever he’s found. Or both. And that’s on worlds within Federation space. Now he’s on a planet between Federation and Romulan space that isn’t even in the neutral zone, and there hasn’t been word one since he left this ship.”

“Doesn’t he usually say he’s arrived?” La Forge asked.

“Exactly,” Riker replied. “I’ve gone over the communiques from every other trip like this he’s taken, and he always says the same thing, more or less: ‘Arrived on whatever planet, am on my way to the site, glad the Enterprise is in good hands.’ But this time nothing.”

“He has been off the ship for thirteen days, nine hours, and fourteen minutes,” said Data. “I believe you are correct; that is an unusually long time without any communication, barring incidences of high security.”

“Thank you, Data, that was precisely what I was thinking. I did some discreet checking and as far as I can tell, he hasn’t been sent on a covert mission. Or if he has, it’s one none of us appear to have clearance for.”

“That is possible, though highly unlikely given previous delicate missions,” Data said, his brow furrowed. “Even in the most dire of circumstances in the past, at least one of us knew or was involved with any such mission.”

“I have heard nothing from a security standpoint that would indicate he is anywhere other than where we thought him to be,” Worf said.

“I looked into that too,” Riker sighed. “The records show he made his transport connections and was scanned in at the spaceport in Shiloh, Dessica Two’s largest city, on stardate 47113.5, on schedule. That’s the last anyone’s officially seen or heard from him.”

“Have you contacted the Dessican authorities?” Worf asked.

“Yes, in a very circumspect manner. They don’t have much of a central government and are pretty lawless. People go there to disappear, so what authority exists isn’t particularly keen to help. I phrased it as needing to reach him but they just repeated when he left that spaceport, and that’s that. They have no transactional records, nothing. He appears to have arrived, walked out, and then...poof.”

“It’s entirely possible things are just as I surmised when you first asked me about this a few days ago,” Crusher said. “He could be happily digging up artifacts like a boy at the beach with his sand and pail.”

“I know. And I do keep trying to tell myself that, but...” Riker shook his head.

“Based on his previous patterns, it’s reasonable for you to be concerned,” Troi conceded in a gentle tone. “There isn’t yet any reason to panic, and we don’t want to interrupt his time away, but perhaps we should attempt to send him a message.”

“That’s exactly what I want to do but I was worried I sound like a badgering nanny, checking up on him.”

“Will, you’re his first officer and his friend. Checking up on him is your job,” Troi emphasized.

“It is possible that the remote location on a remote planet will make communication difficult,” Data suggested. “He may have sent a message and it simply has not come through, in which case he may not receive one you send either.”

“I wondered about that. Is there anything we can do to make the lines more clear?” Riker asked.

“Not really for an incoming message,” La Forge said. “I mean we could sweep the lesser-used subspace channels but if was sending a casual message, he’d use a standard channel and we already routinely scan those at full strength constantly. And we haven’t taken any part of the comm system down for maintenance since he’s been gone.”

“We could nonetheless run an additional sweep,” Data said.

“Yeah, sure, happy to,” La Forge replied. “From our end we could boost the signal strength higher than usual for you to send a message. Going outside of standard parameters does decrease the security of the message, but again if all you’re doing is sending a casual ‘Hello, hope everything is well,’ line, security isn’t that important.”

“Romulans could interpret it as a hidden code,” Worf warned.

“Yeah they could, but it’d be a boring waste of their time,” La Forge replied.

“Set that up for me when we’re done here, please,” Riker requested. “And unless anyone objects, I’d like to head over to the Dessica system a little ahead of schedule. If he’s there playing in the sand, we can leave him to it until he’s ready to come aboard. And if he’s not...”

“Then we’ll all deal with that together,” Troi assured him.



Over the next several hours, Data and La Forge remained on the bridge with Riker to attempt to make contact with Picard. Worf sought out answers through security channels as well as he could, but was unable to discover anything of value. Although the senior staff operated fairly inconspicuously to not alarm the rest of the crew unnecessarily, as each hour ticked by Riker had the helm incrementally increase warp speed towards the Dessica system.

Early the next morning, several attempts were made to communicate directly with people on Dessica Two under various guises searching for any word about a man fitting Picard’s description. Unfortunately, the planet lived up to its reputation as a good place to hide, because what answers they got were small and mostly unhelpful.

Their biggest lead was via someone who remained unidentified in a bar in Shiloh who claimed to have sent a “hairless human

named Galen” to another bar in search of employment. That information had come at the cost of promise of safe transport off of Dessica Two when they arrived and subsequent drop-off on a Federation world. Worf objected that it sounded like a Romulan spy trying to infiltrate Federation space, but Riker was happy enough to make the deal and then let someone else handle the fallout later. A bald man going by the name Galen was just too much of a coincidence to be ignored.

They also learned that Picard had, in fact, attempted to send an arrival message when he first reached the spaceport in Shiloh, but apparently had failed to pay the requisite bribe for it to actually be sent out of the local network. That gave them all hope that he was safe somewhere on the planet, though that hope dwindled again once they reached orbit and all attempts to reach him directly failed. A scan for his combadge failed to show him being on the planet at all, and there were no life signs at Nafir, worrying them further.

Around midday their contact was located and beamed aboard, surrounded by Worf and several other security officers. He turned out to be a small, nervous-looking human who claimed he’d been on the run from a litigious ex-wife and foolishly got himself stuck on Dessica with no way to get back to Federation space. He’d found work matching other drifters to rumoured job openings for a small finder’s fee; enough to get by on but not enough to buy passage off-world. Worf intimidated him so much that he agreed to reside in the brig for the duration of his Enterprise trip, so Riker determined him to be likely harmless.

Meanwhile, the senior officers drafted a plan to visit the bar where the man had sent the so-called Galen. They would dress in civilian attire, arrive at varied times throughout the evening, but remain in transporter lock with the Enterprise with Data on the bridge keeping an eye on them for immediate pullout. La Forge would also stay on the ship to continue scans and attempts at communications to try to locate Picard.



Stardate 47133.6 (Tuesday 02/18/2370, 18:15) – Dessica Two –
City of Shiloh – Unnamed Bar

Riker sauntered into the seedy little bar first, bearing a friendly demeanour and happily engaging in drinks and conversation with anyone receptive to such charms. He was fully aware this made him appear to be an easy mark, but he was prepared for that and used it to draw various folks out. However, other than some amusing anecdotes and possible job offers of varying repute, he came up with little on his own.

While Riker was in mid-conversation with a pair of inebriated Suliban traders, Worf entered. He made a show of nodding gruffly towards Riker – who returned the gesture – to establish that they had met before. It was hoped that this would make each of them appear to familiar in the area and would make it less suspicious if they spoke together later.

Moments later Crusher quietly entered the bar, took a table in a rear corner in the shadows, and waited; watching and listening but not engaging with anybody.

Worf began asking around for a man fitting Picard's description, using his imposing form to mildly intimidate anyone with information into coming forward in the opposite approach to Riker's genial effervescence. In short order he noticed a Yridian man sitting alone at a table watching him closely with deep-set, shifty eyes tucked into a heavily creased, leathery face. Worf abruptly took the seat opposite and asked him, "Are you familiar with a smooth-headed human named Galen?"

The Yridian twitched and gestured for Worf to keep his voice down. "I'm familiar with many things and many people," he

whispered. “But you’ll need to give me more details and perhaps something worth my while before I can answer your questions.”

Meanwhile Troi came in, her arms crossed and sighing as if she was annoyed to be there. She didn’t acknowledge the others at all; instead she tiredly approached the bar and ordered a drink, casually tossing her hair over her shoulder as she did so. When the barkeep readily took the bait and began flirting back at her, she favoured him with a sultry smile and said, “It’s so nice to find good service in this city. I’m at my wits’ end trying to find what I need.”

The barkeep was an unfamiliar species to her. He had lots of fuzzy locks of hair sweeping back from a ridged forehead, several vertical nose ridges, and a single chin ridge that went all the way down to his neck. “Well now, I’d be happy to find a lady like you anything she needs,” he replied as he prepared her beverage.

“At this point, I’m beginning to doubt anybody can. I’m looking for a human with pale skin, about this tall,” she said holding her hand up in the air, “almost no hair on his head, who may be going by the name of Galen. I was sure he’d been here but I can’t seem to find any sign of him.”

“That is unfortunate indeed,” the barkeep said. As he set the drink down in front of Troi, he continued, “So, tell me: why is it so important that you find this man?”

“We had business dealings. He owes me money,” Troi replied firmly, hoping to combine her flirtatious posture with a declaration the barkeep was sure to sympathize with.

But the barkeep seemed to focus too much on the former and insufficiently on the latter as he said in an overly suggestive tone, “Well, if we had business dealings I can tell you that I wouldn’t disappear.”

Troi’s skin crawled but she kept up the pretence by raising an eyebrow and saying, “Maybe we can discuss that possibility.”

“Ooh,” the barkeep replied as if he was about to get what he clearly wanted.

She clamped down on that before it got out of hand by declaring, “But first I have to find him and collect the money I’m owed.”

Still, the barkeep pressed his luck. “I’ll be closing in a few hours. Perhaps we could, uh...discuss this more privately.”

“If I don’t find him, I’m going to have to move on.”

“Oh,” the barkeep said, finally appearing to get the hint that she was serious about her stated goal.

Troi lowered her head a little to appeal to his sympathy without risking further flirtation. “Are you sure you haven’t seen him?”

“Human, just under two metres tall, smooth headed?” the barkeep repeated back, drawing his hand over his own head as if to show off his impressive mane. “Hmm, no, I don’t remember anyone like that,” he said, tapping his chin in an obvious tell that confirmed what she could already sense.

Troi flatly said, “You’re lying.”

The barkeep’s posture changed immediately and he growled, “And you’re a Betazoid. I thought so.”

She shrugged in reply.

The barkeep sighed a little and once again softened his tone, though not as flirtatiously hopeful as before. “Listen, people that come in here...they count on a certain amount of anonymity. And if I were to start answering questions about them – even to a very beautiful woman – well, I wouldn’t be in business very long.” Chuckling, he added, “And being a businesswoman, I’m sure you understand.”

With that he turned his back to her. She sighed, certain that he knew something but also that he wasn’t going to tell her any of it.

On the other side of the room, Worf was having a bit more luck with the squirrely Yridian. He rose from the table to get Riker, who was cheerily chatting up another set of aliens about something to do with a knife fight. Worf gestured and Riker approached him, asking, “Any luck?”

“I think the one over there knows something,” Worf replied, nodding towards the Yridian. “He would not admit to having seen

the captain, but he said anyone who visited the ruins of Nafir would probably come here eventually. I suspect he knows more.”

Riker nodded and said, “Let’s go,” walking towards the Yridian before Worf could finish.

“Commander, I told him –” Worf began, but Riker was already too far away to continue to converse discreetly.

Riker went straight to the Yridian’s table and took the chair Worf had been sitting in. “My friend tells me you know something about the man we’re looking for.”

The Yridian looked around nervously, leaned in, and quietly said, “The only reason I’m talking to you is that I have a sister too.”

Riker regarded him with confusion, then turned to Worf, who took another empty chair at the table.

Worf carefully said, “I explained to him that we are looking for a man who impregnated your sister.”

Riker nodded at Worf, then at the Yridian. “So you can imagine how much this means to me,” he said, turning briefly back to Worf to shoot him an incredulous look for concocting such an archaic, patriarchal story.

“Family honour is important,” the Yridian replied. “If someone had defiled my sister, I would do anything...pay anything to find the one responsible.”

“And how much might ‘anything’ be?” Riker asked, no longer maintaining his earlier jovial spirit.

“As much as five bars of gold-pressed latinum,” the Yridian declared.

Suddenly, the barkeep came up from behind Riker and grabbed the Yridian around the back of his neck. “I think you’ve had a little too much to drink. You’d better leave. On your way, Yranac.”

But right behind him was Crusher, phaser in hand and pointed at the barkeep’s head. She pressed it right up to his cheek as she said, “I’m sorry, but I think he wants to stay.” Then Crusher pointed it at the Yridian and ordered, “Sit down.”

The barkeep reluctantly let Yranac slide obediently back into the chair.

Riker interjected, “That’s my sister. She’s angry. She’s got a vicious temper. I wouldn’t cross her.”

The barkeep bent close and growled in Yranac’s ear, “You say one word and you’re a dead man.” He then stood beside him, glaring down at him.

“Perhaps there’s an element of risk here that I did not fully appreciate,” Yranac said nervously.

“And how much more latinum will it take to offset this risk?” Worf asked.

Yranac shook his head. “This isn’t about latinum. As a man with a sister – a sister with a temper – I can sympathize with you. But how did you come here? Do you have a ship in orbit?”

“Yes,” Riker confirmed.

“Then take me with you. You can drop me anywhere.”

Riker turned back to Worf, who gave an almost imperceptible nod in reply. Riker said to Yranac, “Agreed. Now, talk.”

“The man you’re looking for was here several days ago. There was a group of aliens sitting at this table. He was asking them questions, and they seemed to be considering him for a job.”

“Who were these ‘aliens’?” Worf asked.

“I don’t know,” Yranac replied. “But they looked dangerous. They attacked him. He managed to incapacitate three of them before he was knocked down. He was thrown against that wall,” he said, pointing across the room, “and fell there.”

Troi, who had been listening in from the bar, came over and took Crusher’s phaser to keep it trained on the barkeep while Crusher pulled out a tricorder and investigated the wall.

“I’m picking up a mix of civilian and Starfleet fibre traces along with human cellular debris,” Crusher said.

“Can you establish a DNA reading?” Riker asked.

She shook her head and tapped on the tricorder. “There’s something strange here. The cell structures are badly distorted. It’s as if they’ve been exposed to some kind of high-energy field.”

“A weapon discharge?” Worf surmised.

“It could be,” Crusher replied. She squatted towards the ground where the Yridian said Picard had fallen. “I’m picking up faint traces of micro-crystalline damage in the floor material. But I’m not familiar with the pattern I’m getting.”

“Who are you people?” Yranac asked, increasingly worried.

“You didn’t say anything about a weapon,” Riker retorted.

“I hadn’t finished yet! You’ll like this: the man got what was coming to him. When they knocked him down, one of them took out a weapon and fired. He was vaporized.”

In horror, Riker, Worf, and Crusher all looked to Troi, who sadly reported, “He’s telling the truth.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Stardate 47134.2 (Wednesday 02/18/2370, 23:35) – USS Enterprise – Sickbay

Doctor Crusher stood staring at the wall panel, knowing exactly what it said but not wanting to believe it. Her right hand was balled up against her mouth with her left hand cradling her right elbow, arms tightly against herself in an unsuccessful attempt at comfort.

Riker entered, but not with his usual long gait. Crusher glanced at him; he looked exhausted, spent. She knew what he'd come to ask and she didn't want to answer.

"Well?" he asked, not even needing to articulate the dreadful question further.

Crusher sighed and let her arms drop to her sides. "There's no doubt. It's the captain's DNA." She turned back to the screen because as terrible as the data was, she couldn't bear to look directly at Riker's face. She kept hoping some indication that she was wrong would leap out at her from the screen, some tiny nugget of doubt to cling to, but there was no such rescue from the stark, terrible truth.

Riker didn't respond, so she continued, "I used a multi-base progression to regenerate the DNA. The technique is practically flawless. The cellular damage could have been caused by a variety of energy fields; it's hard to be specific. I can't tell whether it was the field itself that killed him or if he was already dead when..." Crusher trailed off; her attempt to bury her sadness in the cold science of it all had failed. She felt a lump in her throat forming and gritted her teeth against letting it take over.

Riker's jaw was likewise clenched as he nodded. They stood staring at the screen together for a moment, silently, neither knowing what to say to comfort each other or themselves.

But then the moment passed. Riker took a deep breath, adjusted his uniform, and said, “I’ll need your analysis for my report to Starfleet.”

Crusher picked up a PADD from a tray beside her and handed it to him. “It’s all here. But get some sleep. Don’t pretend this is easy.”

He shrugged off her advice and said, “Thank you. I’ll also inform the crew.”

“Save that until morning shift,” she said. “Don’t wake the majority of the ship up to deliver a blow like that.”

“I’ll prepare the report tonight and then make it all official and public first thing tomorrow,” he said. Then he turned on his heel and strode out of the room without another word.

Crusher remained standing before the screen for some time, feeling utterly helpless and on the edge of despair, cursing herself for never having had the courage to fully speak her heart and knowing now she’d never get the chance.



Stardate 47135.0 (Thursday 02/19/2370, 06:45) – Deck Thirty-One – Room 5435, Anna’s Lab

Anna sat idly stacking small components of the still disassembled shield modulator into little towers. She wasn’t really paying attention to the stacks; it was something for her hands to do while she pondered the modulator as a whole, trying out various combinations of components and programming in her head. She’d been awake for some time poking at it without any breakthroughs, but she was used to that. It often took what seemed like ages of mulling a problem over before a random thought would come to her that unlocked everything beautifully.

She was fully aware that this was more about hiding out in this lovely little lab Geordi had given her than actually expecting any fresh results today. She still hadn't gone back to face anyone in engineering since the party and didn't feel any more ready today than she had yesterday. The tour of the nacelle with Data had beaten back her blues but she still felt embarrassed, and no amount of trying to convince herself that nobody else noticed or cared was working. This quiet lab felt safe and she needed this retreat after socially pushing herself too far, too fast.

Anna felt the tension rising back up in her neck and shoulders, so she once again redirected her focus to the modulator. She'd read up on the Borg's subspace-based shield technology in Daystrom's databanks when she was working with Dr. Cortez, but it was clear the Federation lacked the knowledge necessary to copy any of that technology for themselves. Starfleet was still stuck with what seemed like basic graviton forcefields modulated to specific frequencies as needed – hence the modulator – and there were definitely flaws with the subspace model in that when you hit them hard enough with a high narrow band frequency you could overwhelm them. While Anna was relatively disinterested in shields from a battle standpoint, she was endlessly fascinated with ways to use shield technology to improve space travel in general by maximizing safety. She was also highly interested in the concept of personal shielding – again, like the Borg possessed – and wished at times she had a way to move about in a crowd undetected, untouchable, safely observing and enjoying being around other people without having to endure unpleasant interactions.

Thus she sat with dozens of shield-based concepts tumbling over each other in her mind, each seeking a way to pair up with another concept in a new way that would magically yield some fresh technological leap, like a soup of atomic particles swimming around each other just waiting for the right connection to form and snap together to make a new whole.

Her reverie was broken by a sudden voice coming from the panel behind her, making her jump in her chair and send the little tower of parts scattering across the table.

“Attention everyone, this is Commander Riker. I have a ship-wide announcement.”

Anna pulled a face of instant revulsion and hoped he’d stop talking quickly.

“It is my sad duty to inform you all of the untimely death of our captain, Jean-Luc Picard,” Riker continued.

Anna sat up straight and her blood ran cold.

“I regret that I do not have very many details to share at this time, only that the captain appears to have been assaulted while on leave pursuing his beloved archaeological hobby, and perished as a result of that attack. We are investigating further and will make any details known as soon as we are able. But for today, we will all engage in our duties to the highest level of quality and dedication as befits the crew of the Enterprise, honouring Captain Picard as we mourn his loss but keep true to his expectations. Please keep an eye on your message lists today for further information about support as it is made available. Thank you, and let’s make the captain proud.”

Anna wasn’t sure which was worse: the death announcement or the notion of trying to make Jean-Luc Picard proud, but they both made her feel sick to her stomach. She tried to stand but her head swam; the room went fuzzy and grey before her eyes. Instinctively, she backed herself into the corner behind her and sank to the floor, wrapping herself into a tight ball, trembling all over and struggling to breathe.

She was utterly confused as to how she should feel, buffeted by conflicting and overwhelming senses of relief, loss, fury, and heartache. On one hand, this news afforded her new freedom aboard the ship. *Nobody else never has to know now, and he probably hasn’t told anyone because...* Anna cut that thought off, desperate to stave off the horrible memory lurking at the back of her mind. *The Betazoid is still a potential threat, but less so now,*

because even if she reads my mind and figures it out what would it matter anymore? But no, wait...does Riker actually know? Or was he just being a jerk, coming at me like that? Maybe Picard did tell. Maybe all of them know. Maybe I'm just a big joke to everyone here. Did Geordi invite me on board to watch me squirm?

Anna shook her head. She was certain that Geordi and Data were being genuinely kind to her, and Geordi had openly stated his ulterior motive of keeping her happy so she'd stick around being useful. Now freedom of movement without threat of confrontation meant she could be even more useful, and they'd like her even more, right? *Picard's gone now. He can't see me in some corridor and tell me I'm not wanted, to get off his ship, or –*

She cut off the dangerous thought again, desperate to keep the Worst Words at bay.

I can stay here now. I can stay with my friends – actual friends! – and maybe even think of this place as home.

She sat up straight at the thought of that magical word: home. Nowhere had ever been home, not even the Baltimore. England had been pleasant and in time she may have considered it home, if she hadn't kept regressing into terror and hiding alone in her little flat. With Picard gone, the Enterprise could very well be a place where she actually mattered as both a specialist and a person.

Unless they don't want you any more than he did, came the dark thought, smashing away her fragile glimmer of hope. *And even if they did, once they find out you're relieved he's gone, they'll hate you for it. A man everyone worships is dead and you're sitting here trying to make it work for you, you selfish, self-centred, pain in the ass.* The last words came to her in Captain Dager's voice, making her put her hands over her ears as if she could shut out what was in her own head.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she whispered repeatedly, kicking off her leg, curling back into a ball, and rocking herself in the corner.

In trying to banish the mental image of Dager, she failed to keep the image of her mother at bay. Anna clamped down on her head and ears as hard as she could, painfully, and cried out in

anguish both at the pain and knowing that she'd failed because the worst memory, her earliest clear memory, was going to play itself out whether she consented to it or not...

The living room at Grandma's house. The smell of the dust sparkling through the beams of sunlight coming in from the big wooden doors to the yard and their enormous, bright windows. The green and yellow gingham curtains freshly pushed to the side, hence the dust wafting. The red carpet with the blue and white floral pattern, its ragged edges, also dusty, also smelling of old things. The one perfect spot of the edge of that carpet where Anna had picked the ragged bits away to make a smooth buttress for playing Tip.

Tip – her own game, her only game, her obsession, her joy, her peace. Little preschooler Anna every day taking Grandma's heirloom wooden blocks and anything else she could find to make a tower. But not just any tower, because a straight up-and-down tower was easy. Little Anna decided that straight, boring towers were for little children, not her, no, she was a big kid, a young mistress of gravity and physics, of concepts she couldn't yet name but inherently understood. Because with Tip, the point was to offset each element in the stack just so and see both how high and how far the stack could go.

Always at the edge of the carpet for that initial stability, but also so when the construction inevitably came rattling down it did so on the carpet, not the hard floor. No, it wouldn't do to fall on the hard floor because that made noise and noise brought Grandma or worse, Mom into the room to scold her. "What are you doing? Why are you always fiddling with those blocks? Is that the salt box? Is that the soap can from the kitchen? Who told you you could take that? These aren't toys! Why don't you play with your own things quietly in your room?"

Never once did she answer, because she knew the answers wouldn't satisfy them. The blocks were pleasing, she needed the salt box for balance, she needed the soap can to try something with a round edge, she didn't ask permission because she never got it, she didn't have toys of her own, only the dolls that stared at her all night with their dead, open eyes and she wasn't allowed to cry about it, wasn't allowed to make noise, wasn't allowed to interrupt because this was not a place children were wanted.

Because she wasn't wanted. She was her mother's greatest mistake and she knew it because of how often Mom said so and how often Grandma said, "Hush, Meredith, not where she might hear you."

But Anna heard. Anna knew. Anna was very, very good at solving problems, and Tip solved her problems.

Tip was control. Tip was learning. Tip was the perfect pursuit of everything worthwhile.

So there she knelt in the warm spot on the red carpet with the blue and white flowers, carefully starting a new game of Tip. She'd gathered things from the yard the day before that nobody would likely care about. It was going to be a good day of quiet and important four-year-old work.

But Grandma and Mom were arguing again, as they had been for days now. It was getting harder and harder to shut their raised voices out. Anna didn't understand it, but there was something about a ship and going away. Grandma wanted to keep Anna there but Mom kept shouting that she had to come because Grandma was too sick. Anna tried to block out whenever Mom said things like, "And what if you drop dead when I'm light years away?" because she didn't want Grandma to die. Grandma was the only person who'd ever held her hand.

And thus began the sequence of events her twenty-five year old self still railed against, still tried to retroactively change, still tried to never think about but always came and played in full against her will.

Grandma said, "Her father has family that could take her. It's not safe for her to be up there in the dark."

"Would you stop with that?" her mother bellowed. "It's not like I want to bring her but she's my responsibility and that's final!"

Little Anna stood up, stepped over her assembled Tip pieces, and crept to the door to the kitchen. Older Anna begged her not to go, but Little Anna never heard her across time. The Worst Words were coming and she couldn't stop it. She could never stop it.

"Meredith, if a spaceship was a place for children you wouldn't need the captain to help you lie about having her on board. You're jeopardizing your career!"

"My career is all I have to live for anymore! I'm not passing up this opportunity. Dager said I could bring her as long as nobody at HQ knows, so nobody needs to know."

And then her own tiny little voice, so small before Music Man had taught her to sing, so soft and meek said, “I don’t want to go on a ship.”

Two pairs of exhausted grown-up eyes turned towards her, Grandma’s sad, Mom’s angry. “You don’t get a say in this,” Mom said. “Go play outside.”

Older Anna wished she’d listened and gone out to the grass – the soft, cool, beautiful grass! – but little Anna made the biggest mistake by saying, “I want to stay here, on Earth, and find my father.”

The fury that filled her mother’s eyes was the stuff of nightmares. Her lips formed a vicious curl as she strode over to the little girl and grabbed her by the upper arms so hard that thumb bruises remained there for days. She shook her and uttered the Worst Words: “Your father doesn’t want you. He never wanted you. He doesn’t want me because of you. Under no circumstances does Jean-Luc Fucking Picard ever want children and even if he did it wouldn’t be you.”

Grandma shouted and pulled Mom off, but it was too late. The Worst Words had been spoken. They were always spoken, no matter what older Anna tried or wished for. The Worst Words were a curse that echoed through everything else. The Worst Words were why nobody had come for her on Covaris Two. The Worst Words were why she knew she could never have love or give love or be loved, because they existed as constant proof that she was unwanted, unwanted, rubbish to be left to rot, and nothing she could ever do would be good enough to make her worth wanting.

Curled up in the corner of the lab, Anna continued to rock herself, feeling run over by the Worst Words once again, exhausted and alone. Sure there were kind people here, but Data and Geordi were friendly to her because they couldn’t help themselves, not because she deserved any of it. This was the best she could hope for, and she once again tried to take comfort in the fact that now that Jean-Luc Fucking Picard was dead, she might just have a chance to cling to that hope of friendship from people who never need know her ugly little secret. Unless they already did.

“Or unless I mess it up,” she muttered, once again replaying every perceived error of the past few days as she sank deeper into the terrified despair of having to once again be all alone.

She cried silently for awhile, and then whisper-sang *Castle on a Cloud*, thinking that at least Cosette found herself a Papa but admitting to herself now with a final, terrible certainty that she never would.



Stardate 47135.2 (Thursday 02/19/2370, 08:21) – Riker’s Quarters

The term “acting captain” was a little too apropos for Riker’s liking – since it felt like an act indeed – which was why he was sitting reading reports at the desk in his quarters instead of using the ready room. He knew he had every right to that space, but in his heart it was still Picard’s office.

The door chimed. He glared at it, then returned his eyes to the PADD and said, “Come,” steeling himself for whatever conversation was about to be thrust upon him.

Troi entered and sat in the chair beside his desk. “How are you doing?” she asked, emphasizing the “you” to indicate she’d been making her rounds since the announcement this morning.

“I’m all right,” he lied, unable to look at her, knowing she could see right through him.

She didn’t press it. “The crew is pretty shaken up. I’m arranging a memorial. I think you should be the one to deliver the eulogy.”

He turned his eyes down to the PADD again. “I think you’d be better at something like that. Or Beverly. She knew him the longest.”

“I know it’s not going to be easy, but I think it’s important that we face up to what’s happened. You’re in command now. The crew’s looking to you for guidance.”

Riker finally turned to her, irritated that she wasn’t taking his hints to leave him be. “You don’t understand. I can’t give the eulogy because I won’t be at the service.”

She rose and approached him, explaining patiently, “Will, a memorial service helps to give everyone a sense of completion. It helps them begin the healing process.”

“That’s exactly the point. I don’t want to heal.”

“Will – “

“I have an open wound, right here,” he said, tapping his chest. “It hurts like hell. I don’t want it to get better, and I don’t want to pretend that everything’s all right.” He stood and crossed the room to stare out his window, hoping she’d leave but knowing she wouldn’t.

“I know you’re angry,” Troi said.

He knew this was her job and that she meant it kindly, but he didn’t want to have this conversation so he snapped, “You’re damn right! And I intend to stay angry until I find whoever’s responsible for the captain’s death.” He knew he was being harsh, but assumed she’d take it in good stead as she usually did, give him a pat on the shoulder, and move along.

Thus he was entirely surprised when she scolded, “Will, that’s pretty selfish of you. Do you think you’re the only one in pain? Do you think you have the monopoly on loss? Well let me tell you something: we’re all hurting, and we’re all angry.” Tears welled up in her eyes as she shouted, “And whether you like it or not, you have a responsibility to this crew! And you can’t just indulge your personal desire for revenge!”

Riker towered over Troi and snarled, “That is enough, Counsellor.” But the pain in her expression as she turned and walked away from him broke his heart. “Deanna,” he said in a softer tone. “I’m sorry.” He meant it. He didn’t want to hurt her – especially not her – but pain was all he knew at that moment and

tossing it around was easy. She turned back to him, so he approached her and tried to explain, “This is not about revenge. This is about justice. The captain died in a bar fight for nothing. Somebody has to answer for that. Then I can mourn.”

She looked at him for a moment longer, and then left without another word.

Riker sighed. Everything about all of this was wrong.



Half an hour later, sitting in the captain’s chair on the bridge with Data leaning awkwardly in the first officer’s chair beside him didn’t do much for Riker’s mood either. He knew he should be leading, taking charge, doing something, but he felt stuck and was all too aware that he was keeping everyone stuck along with him.

From behind him, Worf said, “Commander, I am receiving a transmission from Admiral Chekote at Starbase 227.”

“I’ll take it in the ready room,” Riker replied, still unwilling to call it his ready room.

“Aye sir,” Worf replied as Riker left the bridge.

Picard’s desk was now cleaned off except for a single, tapered crystal Riker had many times seen the captain turning over in his hands while trying to come to an important decision. He didn’t know why it had been left behind, but he picked it up and held it reverentially as he sat in Picard’s chair and turned on Picard’s terminal.

“Sir,” he answered when Chekote came on the screen.

“I read your report, Commander. My condolences to you and your crew,” the Admiral said solemnly. “Captain Picard’s death is a loss to the entire Federation.”

Riker nodded, feeling like so much more should be said and yet knowing there was little else to say.

The admiral continued, “Now, I see you’ve asked to postpone your mission to the Argus sector. For what reason?”

“I have a request, sir. I’d like to conduct an investigation into Captain Picard’s death.”

“The Dessican authorities have jurisdiction in this case, Commander.”

“I know that, sir. Frankly, I don’t have much confidence in the authorities on Dessica Two. There’s every reason to believe they’re corrupt.”

“Well, I suspect you’re right. But the question remains: are you the one to pursue this?”

Riker considered how much he should let on about his real feelings, and then decided blunt honesty would probably work the best in his favour. “The Captain’s death hit me pretty hard,” he admitted. “I may not be completely objective, but no one is more determined than I am. I won’t rest until we find out who’s responsible.”

Admiral Chekote nodded. “All right, Commander. I’m officially placing the Enterprise on detached duty. Your mission is at your discretion. Good luck.”

“Thank you, sir.” Riker ended the call and sat up in the chair with a renewed sense of conviction, and he knew precisely where that conviction should land first.



Riker found Yranac sitting at a table filled with a wide variety of food in the guest quarters. The Yridian looked up to Riker with the eyes of a man who imagines himself to be very clever but clearly has no idea which way the wind is actually blowing.

“Ah, Commander Riker. I’ve been meaning to speak to you. I was wondering if you could move me to better quarters. I don’t care much for the decor here,” Yranac said with glib confidence.

Riker put on his best faux diplomatic smile. “These are the best quarters we have.” It wasn’t actually true since the Enterprise had several luxury guest quarters for shuttling around the quadrant’s most important people, but as far as he was concerned Yranac was lucky to be in standard guest quarters instead of the brig.

Yranac shrugged and continued eating.

“I was hoping now that you’ve had a chance to relax,” Riker said, gesturing at the food, “you might have remembered some of the details about the aliens you saw. Something you may have forgotten before.”

“Sorry, my memory isn’t what it used to be,” Yranac claimed dismissively.

Riker smiled again, though now it had a decidedly undiplomatic edge to it. He moved to the opposite side of the table and retorted, “They murdered a man in cold blood in full view of everyone in the bar and you can’t remember anything about them?”

Yranac stopped eating, but maintained his defiant expression. “Now that you mention it, I do remember one thing. They said they’d kill anyone who talked about what happened.”

“Do you know where they went?”

Yranac grinned knowingly but said nothing.

Riker moved once more, this time to stand towering over the Yridian. “So you know who they are and you know where I can find them.”

“Perhaps I do.”

He bent down to lean on the table and looked Yranac squarely in the eye. “What do you want?”

“Not a great deal, Commander. Just a shuttlecraft. I believe I’d like to travel for a while, see more of the galaxy. You understand.”

Riker stood back up, chuckling incredulously. *He thinks he’s holding a winning hand and doesn’t even realize who he’s playing with*, he thought as he prepared to play his own. “A shuttlecraft? Well, here’s my offer. Instead of the ship, I’ll give you some time.”

“Time?”

“If you’re lucky, you’ll only spend the next five years in prison instead of the next twenty,” Riker said, then grabbed him by the lapels and threw him up against the wall. “You’ve got twelve outstanding arrest warrants for fraud and petty theft in the Klingon Empire. You tell me what you know, I’ll pull some strings. Maybe they’ll reduce your sentence after you’ve been extradited.”

Yranac pleaded, “If I tell you what I know, you must promise not to give me to the Klingons!”

“I’ll think about it,” Riker growled.

“Perhaps you could send me to a Federation rehabilitation colony instead?”

Riker tossed him back into the chair and ordered, “Talk.”

Cowed, Yranac began to reveal what he knew. “The aliens were some kind of mercenary group. They’ve been operating in this sector for the last six months.”

“Where do we find them?”

“I heard one of them mention the Barradas system. I think they were headed there.”

“You think?” Riker demanded.

“That’s all I know.”

Riker wasn’t sure if Yranac was telling the truth. The Yridian’s eyes were as shifty as ever, but he decided it was good enough of a lead to go with for now. He tapped his combadge and said, “Riker to Data.”

“*Data here,*” came the reply.

“Take us out of orbit. Set course for the Barradas system, warp six,” Riker said with a winning grin directed at Yranac.

“*Aye sir.*”

With that, Riker left Yranac to mull over his limited options and headed back to the bridge.



Beverly sat awkwardly on the edge of her comfortable chair, staring at the replicator. She knew she should eat some dinner, but despite staring at it for ten minutes, she couldn’t conceive of anything she was willing to eat. She’d done her duty all day long, but she’d hardly slept the night before and the combination of exhaustion and grief was getting to her.

Not eating will make me feel worse, but doing anything also feels worse, she thought. The lump came back into her throat and she realized she wasn’t going to be able to eat much of anything, so instead she started trying to convince herself to at least try some kind of soup.

Her door chimed and she sighed, half hoping it was an emergency that would distract her, and half hoping it would miraculously be Jean-Luc, though she knew that would never happen again. “Enter,” she said.

Deanna came in and gave her a bit of a forced smile. “I’m not even going to pretend this is a casual visit, because you know it isn’t.”

“I bet you’re as exhausted as I am, having made your own rounds all day, checking on everyone.” Beverly pointed to the other soft chair and Deanna plopped into it. “I suppose I should offer you tea or something but I’ve just been sitting here petulantly trying to talk myself into eating or drinking something and it’s not working very well.”

“I understand that. I managed to have some lunch in Ten Forward because it was busy in there and I could somewhat distract myself, but the reality of it was all around me in everyone’s thoughts. There’s no escape from it yet, I’m afraid.”

“No, and I can’t imagine there will be for some time.”

Deanna leaned forward. “You were closer to him for a lot longer than anyone else on board.”

“Yes, off and on,” Beverly admitted. She laughed a little, then wiped a tear from her eye. “We’ve had a complicated relationship over the years. It often seemed that just as he’d stop blaming himself for Jack’s death, I’d start. But being on board the Enterprise cleared all of that into the past where it belongs. And the way he’s been there for me, for Wesley...” Beverly trailed off into a sigh.

“Have you told Wesley yet?”

“No, I haven’t had a chance.” She looked Deanna in the eye and shrugged. “Okay, I haven’t had the heart. I suppose I ought to soon, though, before he hears in from someone else.”

“I imagine word will spread through HQ and then the Academy pretty quickly.”

“You’re right. I’ll try to get in touch with him before I go to bed, or at least send a message. How are you with it? It must be hard trying to manage everyone else’s grief on top of your own.”

Deanna sank back into the chair. “That comes with the job. I find myself going back and forth between feeling strong enough to help others and then wanting to just hide and cry.”

“I did that four times today,” Beverly admitted, “and I’m pretty certain everyone in sickbay did at some point or other. Poor Alyssa went into one of the isolation rooms and found Dan in there already crying, and the two of them trying to apologize to each other in the corridor just made everyone else run off to have a few tears in peace. He was such a powerful figure in all of our lives. A lot of the junior staff looked up to him as a role model, almost a father figure.”

Deanna hung her head for a moment, then sat upright once more and said, “Beverly, there’s something I should tell you.”

“Oh?”

“I feel guilty doing it, because one of the captain’s last wishes he expressed to me was to not tell you, but he obviously didn’t anticipate any of what we’re facing now and there’s another person at stake in all of this.”

“Who?”

“The young woman Geordi just brought aboard, Anna White.”

“Oh. I’ve seen her. She was at Geordi’s party but the poor thing got scared off. What does she have to do with the captain?”

“He was the person in command she didn’t want to see,” Deanna said carefully.

“Now see, that’s strange, because Geordi thought the same thing too on the night of the party, but then it was Will that scared her off.”

“Will?”

Beverly pulled a tiredly annoyed face and waved her hand in the air. “Oh you know Will. He thought he was being charming but she was clearly terrified at being approached by a gigantic man in command colours. I pulled him to the side to remind him to leave her alone, but when I turned around again, she’d left. I assumed that confirmed he was the one she didn’t want to see.”

“No, it wasn’t him, although he should have known better than to approach her at all,” Deanna said, rolling her eyes. “Unfortunately, the captain had reason to suspect her directive had a much more personal and extreme reason than merely not liking Will’s role in Data’s Starfleet hearing.”

“He did? What was it?”

Deanna took a deep breath and bluntly said, “He believed he might be her father.”

Beverly blinked in confusion and started to say something several times but failed. Finally she just shook her head and asked, “What?!”

“When he said he knew someone aboard the Baltimore, he meant he knew Anna’s mother Meredith White. She and the captain had been dating for some time.”

Beverly’s eyes went wide and she stood up, her hands going to the sides of her head. “Oh! Oh no! It was that Meredith!”

“You knew her?”

“No, not in person, but I knew of her.” Beverly began to pace around the room as she recounted the memories flooding back to her. “When Jean-Luc and I first met, he was dating someone

named Meredith, and when I suggested we all get together Jack thought it was very funny because he predicted they wouldn't last. I remember thinking at the time that Jack was just trying to keep me away from his charming friend because we'd only been together a short time ourselves." She began to wring her hands as she continued pacing. "But they were together almost all of that year, I think, and when the Stargazer was back for repairs I again tried to convince Jack to get together with several of his friends. We were getting serious and you know how it is, you want to meet his friends and see how he is with them in case it's vastly different from how he is with you."

"Yes indeed. I recommend it."

"I can't remember why but it never worked out for all of us to get together, and then all of a sudden the Stargazer was back off and Jack said Jean-Luc was in a foul mood over some kind of breakup. But yes, that would be what, twenty-five, twenty-six years ago?"

"Apparently the dates line up a little too perfectly," Deanna explained. "He said they broke up and nine months later, Anna was born."

"And all of this time he had no idea?"

"It would seem not."

"That's right, there's no father listed in her record. I hate incomplete records," Beverly said with a briefly irritated expression as she sat back down.

"That's why I told the captain to tell you of his suspicions, so you could test his DNA. But he said you'd need Anna's consent."

"Yes I would, now that she's an adult. Does he —" Beverly cut herself off from using the incorrect tense and her shoulders slumped at the need to do so. "Did he know for certain or was it merely speculation?"

"Speculation. He seemed certain at first, but then he was clearly trying to convince himself otherwise because he didn't want to believe it."

“I’m not sure I want to believe it with all of the implications that comes with it. Does she know?”

“I don’t know, and neither did he.”

“I meant not just about her paternity, but that he’s...gone?”

“I assume she heard the announcement this morning along with everyone else.”

Beverly slumped further into the chair. “So she could be sitting in engineering right now, having come aboard intending to avoid this man who might be her father, and now found out he’s dead.”

“I imagine she’s terribly confused right now.”

“Maybe I should contrive a reason to see her, just to check on her.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“No, probably not. Oh what a mess,” Beverly said, leaning forward to put her head in her hands.

“I’m sorry to drag you into it, but as I said to him, it’s something the Chief Medical Officer should be aware of. And I’m also sorry to break his confidence in me, but I’m certain he would have eventually told you if he’d had the chance. He’d only started to grapple with it all himself, and he was really struggling.”

“I can imagine. And you’re right, this is the sort of thing I ought to be aware of. That’s why I hate incomplete records, because it makes treating many injuries and diseases that much harder if you don’t have a full DNA record to go on.”

Deanna nodded. “I think it’s best if you and I find out all we can about her without disrupting her in any way directly. Obviously everything is very hectic right now but when it settles, I’m planning to pull some contacts to send me some of her secured files from The Institute and the research that was done on the Baltimore’s remains. I gathered some related information at my conference this week, but I still need to track down some specific records for her. I very much agree with what you said a few weeks ago, that Starfleet owes her a place of kindness and safety, and I can’t help but wonder why she’d come on board her father’s ship

and then issue an edict to be left alone unless part of her actually wanted him to eventually make contact with her.”

“Assuming he really is her father. I wish I could legitimately confirm it.”

“Even if he isn’t, even if all of this is wrong and it’s Will or someone else she dislikes, I feel compelled now to find out as I can so we can reach out to her eventually. Because despite the captain’s protestations and attempts to deny it to himself, Beverly, I felt the certainty in him. I believe he’d want us to care for her now that he can’t.”

“I’m having the most unfair thought right now, and I’m ashamed of it, but the thought that part of him is still with us in her...”

“I’ve had the same thought, and it is indeed unfair but it’s also entirely natural.”

“We can’t make her a substitute for him. It’s not her job to be his relic to help us in our grief,” Beverly declared.

“No, but it is our job to be there for her along with everyone else, and if she has this special connection to him and ever wishes to explore that –”

“Then we can be the bridge for her.”

“Exactly.”

Beverly nodded, and all at once the full weight of it all came down upon her. Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled over her cheeks, and she no longer fought them. Deanna leaned forward and took her hands, and they sat together crying in shared loss of one of their closest friends as well as determination to do right by a young woman neither of them had even met.

CHAPTER NINE

Stardate 47138.1 (Friday 02/20/2370, 09:45) – Observation Lounge

As the ship dropped out of warp and assumed an orbit around Barradas Three, Riker stood and nodded to Data, La Forge, and Worf, who all dutifully followed him into the Observation Lounge.

Once they were seated, Data reported, “Barradas Three is the only Class M planet in this system, and it is listed as unpopulated. However, sensors have detected intermittent energy signals emanating from its surface.”

“What’s the source?” Riker asked.

La Forge answered, having been studying the planet on long-range sensors all morning as they approached. “Well, the signals are difficult to localize, but they could be emissions from some kind of power converter.”

“Which could indicate a base or a ship,” Worf added.

Riker nodded. “What else do we know about Barradas Three?”

Data replied, “The planet was used as an outpost for the Debrune approximately two thousand years ago. The Federation’s archaeological survey has catalogued numerous ruins on the surface.”

Riker considered the information for a moment, then stood. “Mr. Worf, I’d like a security detail to accompany the away team to the surface. I’ll lead the team. Geordi, you’re with me. Mr. Data, you have the bridge.”

“Aye, sir,” Data said reflexively as they all stood, despite his concerns. “Commander, as Acting First Officer, I must question your decision to accompany the away team. If Captain Picard were here –“

“He’s not.”

“I realize that, sir. But if he were, and he wanted to lead an away team, you would tell him that the captain’s place is –”

“On the bridge. Not this time,” Riker declared, then turned and left.

Data raised his eyebrows for a moment, but knew better than to argue matters such as these with an anxious human.



Stardate 47138.2 (Friday 02/20/2370, 10:20) – Surface of Barradas Three

Barradas Three was bright and verdant; a lovely planet to visit if it wasn’t out in the middle of nowhere between Romulan and Federation territory. It was clear to anyone who saw it why the Debrune – a now-extinct offshoot of Romulans – would have settled the place, but what was not clear was why they’d abandoned it, leaving their villages to decay over the last two thousand years. Romulan-defined space made a curious dip around the Barradas system, almost as if Romulan borders had been drawn specifically to exclude Barradas and Dessica, but nobody in the Federation knew why or if it had to do with the curious disappearance of the Debrune.

The crew arrived on the surface beside one of the largest settlement ruins and immediately began scanning everything in sight. Riker directed them, sending ensigns to scan segments of the ruins and compare them to the Federation archaeological survey’s records to see what, if anything, had changed recently. After he’d sent the last ensign on his way, he put his foot up on the ragged, rocky remains of a wall and called La Forge over. “Geordi? Anything?”

La Forge joined him at the little wall. “It’s tough to get accurate sensor readings. There’s an awful lot of interference in the area.”

“From what?”

“I’m not sure. It’s very unlocalized. It could be atmospheric.”

Riker turned and pointed to one of several charred, shallow pits in the ground around the ruins. “What do you make of these?”

La Forge stepped over the ruined wall, and both he and Riker knelt beside the pit and picked at the ashes. “Well, these ruins around here are pretty ancient but I’d say that this indentation was made fairly recently. Could be the site of some battlefield.”

“It doesn’t look like any blast point I’ve ever seen. The shape is too perfect.”

La Forge closely examined the bit of scorched rock in his hand using different views through his VISOR. “Commander, there’s microcrystalline damage all throughout this area: the same kind of pattern that Doctor Crusher picked up in the floor of that bar on Dessica Two.”

Worf called out, “Commander!” from another part of the ruins, so Riker and La Forge went to join him. When they came to his side, he said, “I found something,” and turned to one of Worf’s security team who was scanning some pottery on top of the sand, not buried at all.

“It looks as if someone could have just dropped it,” Riker noted.

But before any of them could examine it further, a phaser shot burst out from behind a large rock a short distance away, hitting the security officer in the chest and sending him flying backwards. The others all dove for cover as more shots were fired at each of them.

La Forge tapped his combadge and reported, “La Forge to Enterprise. We are under attack down here!”



Stardate 47138.2 (Friday 02/20/2370, 10:35) – Enterprise – Bridge

La Forge's voice came over the comm system, saying, "*I repeat, we are under attack!*" but the last syllable crackled out into static.

Ensign Giusti at the ops station said, "Commander, we've lost contact with the away team."

Data leaned forward in the captain's chair. "Is there a malfunction?"

"No, sir. The comm system is being jammed."

"What is the source?"

"Somewhere on the surface."

"Bridge to Transporter Room Two," Data called out. "Can you get a lock on the away team?"

A reply came back over the comm to say, "*Negative, sir. There's too much interference.*"



On the surface, the phaser fire continued. A Romulan woman scurried out from behind the rocks to grab the pottery, and then leapt back behind the cover as the Starfleet officers began firing their own phasers at her and those shooting at them.

Riker retreated back to where another Enterprise security officer was firing from behind a ruin wall. "I'm going to head for those trees over there. If I can get there, we might be able to set up a crossfire," he said before heading off to the side.

The firefight continued, sending sparks flying off of rocks and even bursting a few open beside peeking heads, but without either side making any notable gains. But as Riker reached his next intended position, a burst of phaser fire ricocheted off of the rock he attempted to lean on, blowing him backwards through the air and landing him unconscious on the ground.

Seeing an officer down, the opposing side all made their move together, going to Riker's side. There, the Romulan woman

checked him for life signs and all of them were suddenly transported away, leaving the rest of the Starfleet officers behind.



On the bridge, Ensign Giusti reported, “Something’s changed, sir. I believe we are once again in contact with the away team.”

Data tapped his badge and said, “Data to away team. Please respond.”

La Forge’s voice came back over the comm. “*Data, we’ve been attacked. We’ve got one casualty and Commander Riker has been taken captive.*”

Next came Worf’s voice to report, “*Sir, the mercenaries have beamed away. They must have a base or a ship nearby. Can the sensors locate anything?*”

Giusti said, “Commander, we’re picking up a vessel leaving orbit.”

“Why was it not detected earlier?” Data asked.

“They could have been using the planet as a shield.” The console in front of the ensign began beeping an alarm. “Sir, they are powering up their weapon systems.”

“Raise shields. Red alert,” Data declared as he returned to the captain’s chair.

A small craft sped past the Enterprise, taking several shots before hurrying away. The ship was rocked, but not heavily so.

“Damage report,” Data ordered.

“Minor hit on the port deflector. No damage. They’re running, sir. Their speed is warp eight point seven and holding. I think they’re at their maximum.”

“Take us to warp nine and pursue. Lock phasers on target.”

Giusti said, “Sir, we should be within phaser range in twenty three seconds.” She tapped the console and reported, “Switching to long-range scanners. Commander, the sensor image of that ship is extremely weak. It’s fading.” With an utterly baffled expression,

she said, “The ship doesn’t register on the long-range sensors. I’m sorry, sir. We’ve lost them.”

Data rose again. “Increase the sensor field bandwidth. Patch in the lateral sensor arrays.”

Giusti followed the orders but was still unable to locate the mercenary ship. “It’s no good, the signal’s gone. It just disappeared.”

Data’s brow furrowed a little. “Plot a course and take us back to Barradas Three. Notify the away team to prepare for transport.”

“Aye, sir.”



Stardate 47138.2 (Friday 02/20/2370, 10:38) – Enterprise – Bridge

Anna was in her lab trying to convince herself she was working, but in reality she still hadn’t been able to regain her concentration on much of anything since the news of Picard’s death. In her effort to not think about him, she constantly attempted to overload her mind with thoughts of anything and anyone else, which made it hard to concentrate on a single topic such as actual research.

Just as she was contemplating returning to her quarters to once again try to get some sleep, a loud whooping sound filled the room and several lights and panels began to flash red.

She knew this must be a “red alert” but she had no idea what she was supposed to do about it. She’d been instructed as part of her initial conversations with Geordi to leave the warp core area in the event of a red alert and to seek cover if necessary, but she’d glossed over that standard warning in the email because she thought red alerts must be fairly rare in day-to-day operations. Nobody had told her what to do if she was in her own space

already. *Am I supposed to go to my quarters or stay out of the corridors? Do I have to find an evacuation point? Should I brace for impact? Are we crashing? We're not at war so we must be –*

At that moment the ship was rocked enough to make the room shake, though nothing fell over. Nonetheless, Anna screamed and dove under the table, huddling herself up into a ball and rocking in absolute terror. Memories of the Baltimore crash she usually kept at bay began to flood her mind; the noise, the flashing red lights, the helpless feeling of being small and alone amidst terror and trauma.

When a moment passed without further movement of the ship, she scrambled out from under the table and crawled into one of the empty cabinets at the side of the room. She barely fit, but the tightness of the space helped her begin to breathe more regularly again. Holding the door closed also blocked out most of the flashing red light, but she closed her eyes anyway to shut out the rest.

Anna tried to think of songs to sing to calm herself, but the thought of another impending crash overwhelmed her. She began to sob into her knees, ashamed to be hiding, frightened for herself and her new friends, confused and alone with nobody to turn to for guidance or help.

Several minutes later when she dared to open her eyes and peek out of the cabinet, the red lights were gone, but there was no announcement, no word of what had happened, nothing to indicate what she should do next. She pulled the cabinet door closed again and sat in there hiding from any further red alerts and her own deepening shame.



Stardate 47138.4 (Friday 02/20/2370, 12:23) – Observation Lounge

“Starfleet Intelligence confirms that a ship matching this configuration has been linked to raids on several other planets in this sector,” said Data, now in command of the Enterprise and briefing Worf, La Forge, and Troi. The screen in the Observation Lounge showed what they knew about the ship that had taken Commander Riker. “For the short time it was within our visual range, we were able to take sensor readings of the mercenary vessel. It appears to be encased in an energy absorbing material. Although we can see the ship, this energy sheath renders it virtually undetectable to our long range sensors.”

“There must be some way we can track it,” Troi said hopefully.

“Data, I know this is a long shot but if I remodulate the long range sensor array, I might be able to make it sensitive enough to detect the ship,” La Forge suggested.

Data shook his head. “Without a full compositional analysis of the energy sheath, the chances of finding the correct remodulation sequence are remote.”

Clearly exasperated, Worf stood as he declared, “Sir, they have taken Commander Riker. We must do something. We cannot just sit here!”

Data remained implacably calm as he sat down at the head of the table and said, “On the contrary, Lieutenant. That is precisely what we must do.” He folded his hands before him on the table and looked at Worf expectantly until the latter also sat back down.

Then he continued, “Since there are no viable alternatives, we will return to the surface and attempt to determine what these mercenaries are doing on this planet. An investigation might reveal some indication of their purpose. Please notify me when you have assembled your search teams. Dismissed.” Data sat back in his seat with a firmly stoic expression, his fingers steepled together in faux contemplation as a signal that the discussion was over.

The others exchanged unhappy looks as they rose and left the room, but they all knew Data was in command and it was their duty to follow his orders.



Geordi knew Data was right about not wasting time chasing after unlikely prospects, and he knew it was important both on a personal and professional level to follow Data's orders while he was in charge, but he also felt that they shouldn't give up on a possible technological solution so readily.

Thus, on his way back to main engineering to assemble a search team, he asked the computer for Anna's current location. She was in her lab, so he stopped off on Deck Thirty-One and rang her door chime. The door opened, but when he went in she was nowhere to be seen.

"Anna?" he asked, noticing her artificial leg on the floor. "Anna?" he repeated, increasingly worried.

"I'm in here," came a muffled voice from the cabinets along the wall. The door to the end cabinet opened slightly and she peeked out at him.

"Uh, what are you doing in there?"

"Hiding from the red alert."

"What red alert?"

She opened the door further and gave him a sheepish shrug. "It was awhile ago. There was a red alert and the ship shook and..." she trailed off in a sigh.

"And you've been hiding in there ever since?"

"I was afraid if I came out, it'd happen again."

Geordi went over to her and offered a hand, saying, "Come on, let's get you out of there." She looked at his hand for a moment, then took it and let him help her out and into the nearby chair. "I'm sorry you were that spooked. I didn't even think about it scaring you that bad."

"It shouldn't have. I'm being stupid."

"I don't think you're capable of that. And actually, that's why I came to see you, because I need help with an unusual sort of thing,

but now I'm thinking it's cruel to ask for your help if you're feeling like this."

She shrugged again, looking away in obvious shame that he wished he could alleviate. "It's probably good to have something to distract me."

"Do you even know what's going on? Why there was a red alert?"

Anna shook her head.

"Okay well...right, I'm in a bit of a rush so I'm going to give you the really short version. The mercenaries that killed the captain now have abducted Commander Riker, and as they did that they fired on the Enterprise, which is why there was a red alert. I wasn't even on the ship at the time; a bunch of us were still on the planet. And now Data – he's in command, by the way – wants us to go back to the planet to try to figure out what these mercenaries are up to because we can't track them because their ship has some kind of energy-absorbing casing that defeats our long-range sensors."

She looked up at him in abject terror. "You want me to go to the planet?!"

"What? No. I was hoping you could help with trying to track the mercenary ship. How much do you know about long range sensors?"

"They're not my main area of expertise but I'm familiar with the specs."

Geordi explained, "I suggested to Data that we remodulate the array to increase sensitivity but he said without knowing what's confounding the sensors, it's not likely we can find it."

Anna frowned in thought, then said, "He's right. And if he's in charge, is he in danger? Do you always lose command crew at this rate?"

"No, this is a record, even for us. And yeah, he's right but I feel like we have to at least try something, even if it's a long shot."

Anna nodded. "Long shots are definitely my thing."

“Exactly. And you know a lot about unusual materials, so I was hoping maybe you might have some unique insights into whatever they might be using on their hull.”

“But wait, why is Data in charge? I thought he was in engineering and ops.”

“He is, but he’s also second officer.”

“But you two have the same rank?”

“Yes.”

“This is very confusing. Why isn’t his rank higher if he is second officer?”

“Because he hasn’t done the tests for the higher rank. I really do need to –”

“But surely Data can pass any test very easily?”

Geordi wanted to tell her that he didn’t have time to explain Data’s position right now, but he could see she was fixating on that. He decided it was best to sum it up for her so she could hopefully then drop it and move on, much in the way that he often had to handle Data’s similar random outbursts of curiosity. “Data is one of those people who fixates on the things he wants to do here and now, and while he might be doing something long-term like thinking about quantum physics or studying every form of painting from a particular century, he’s very much in the present of those tasks as they are here and now. So while he wants to experience and accomplish lots of things, if it’s not his current interest it sort of gets shelved.

“You’re right, he could pass every Starfleet test and qualify on paper for top rank tomorrow if he wanted to, but I think part of him knows he has to prove himself capable beyond the computational parts. That’s what the captain was so good at with Data: supporting him when others disregarded him and pushing him when he disregarded himself. I know he’s interested in a full command position and he’s practicing it right now out of necessity, but it just doesn’t seem like something he wants for himself here and now, but here and now is where we all are.”

Although she turned away at mention of the captain, Anna nodded again. “Then I want to do whatever I can in the here and now to help him. And you. Let me at it. Let me try. Set me loose in the sensor systems so I can try some stuff out, and I won’t change anything live until you approve.”

“Actually I already granted that access and several others to your console in here the other day. I just haven’t had a chance to tell you. Everything’s been so crazy.”

“Then I’ll get to it and you go do whatever you need to do to make sure nobody else gets killed or kidnapped or whatever other nonsense keeps happening to the officers on board. I’ll let you know if I come up with anything.”

“Thanks. And Anna? If you’re scared like that again, call me. Or Data. Even when we’re busy, we don’t want you to feel like that. And I promise when we get the commander back, I’ll give you a proper orientation on emergency procedures. I’m really sorry about this.”

She nodded, so he gave her as much of an encouraging smile as he could muster and then hurried off.



Stardate 47138.5 (Friday 02/20/2370, 13:15) – Mercenary Vessel

Riker tried to open his eyes, but his mind was deep in a fog and his head thumped with much more than the after-effects of a phaser stun. He felt drugged and tried to fight it, but his head kept swimming, so he stayed still and breathed deeply. He couldn’t hear anything other than the typical hum of a ship around him, so he took the time to wake himself gradually until at long last, he could open his eyes.

He was in a small, nondescript room he didn't recognize other than to be sure it wasn't the Enterprise. Instinctively, his hand went to his chest to activate his combadge, but it wasn't there. He grunted, knowing that was a bad sign.

But before he could figure out anything else about his situation, the door opened and the Romulan woman they'd seen on Barradas Three entered and stood over him, hands on hips and looking distinctly unimpressed.

"Get up," she ordered.

Riker considered ignoring the request, but didn't like the general image of a Starfleet officer at the feet of a Romulan, so he took a deep breath and struggled to his feet. He thought he might fall over, but she grabbed his arm, marched him through corridors he couldn't keep track of, and then dragged him onto what was clearly the bridge of the ship.

Like most small craft, the bridge was cramped and crowded with consoles in every available space. This was no luxurious Galaxy class ship, or even a comfortable middle-size Starfleet vessel. Everything about this bridge – from the central standing console that allowed a captain to peer over all of the crew at once, to the small-backed, hard-looking seats – suggested dominant utility above all else.

Though he still felt quite groggy, Riker attempted to take in as many details as he could, including the argument in progress by what appeared to be an engineering console. A distinctly leonine man was towering over a nervous, smaller man with a tall, messy pile of fuzzy hair on his head. Neither was a race Riker recognized.

The more imposing one asked, "What's the problem?"

The nervous one replied, "I warned you not to push the engines so hard. Two of the power shunts are on the verge of collapse. We'll be lucky if we can maintain warp six."

Riker swatted the Romulan woman's arm off of his. She glared at him, but he made a show of ignoring her while continuing to look around and listen in.

"How long will it take to repair?" asked the obvious leader.

“I can try to realign the warp core. It’ll take at least eleven hours, but I’ll have to shut the engines down completely.”

“We’re not stopping,” the dominant one declared. “We can’t afford to be sitting helpless in space. I want warp eight available in five hours and I don’t want to hear your excuses, Narik.”

Riker considered how familiar it was in general to have an engineer lay out a timetable only to have command demand it be shortened, but this interplay was far from the respectful pushing within Starfleet roles. It was clear from the way Narik scowled and stormed away that he feared the leader more than he believed he could get the job done.

The woman tried to take Riker’s arm again, but he snapped it back out of her grasp once more as the leader came over to him and asked, “What were you doing on Barradas Three?”

Riker straightened his shirt, stared into the distance, and recited, “William T. Riker, Commander, SC-two-three-one-dash-four-two-seven.”

“Oh really? Well, I am Arctus Baran and I don’t have a number. Now what were you doing on Barradas Three, Commander?”

Riker considered restating his rank and serial number, but figured it wouldn’t do much good. Instead he adopted a deliberately cheeky grin and replied, “We were studying the ruins. It was a scientific expedition.”

“Don’t patronize me. Those ruins have been studied for centuries. There’s nothing new to learn from them.”

“Then what were you doing there?” Riker asked.

Baran glared at Riker for a moment, then pressed a device on his belt.

Pain seared through Riker’s entire body, enough to knock him to his knees. As he gasped in agony, he found himself reaching up to his own neck, where his fingers found something embedded there. He tried immediately to claw it away.

“Oh, don’t bother, Commander, you can’t remove it,” Baran said drily. “It’s a neural servo connected directly to your nervous system. It lets me control precisely how much pain you feel. This

setting is usually sufficient. However, if necessary, it can go much higher.” He pressed his remote device again, sending Riker writhing to the floor until Baran stopped it once more. “These devices were the idea of my predecessor. It’s a convenient way of enforcing discipline.”

Riker glared up at Baran. “What happened to him?”

“He failed to enforce it with me.”

A red-haired alien woman stood from one of the consoles above and behind Riker. “This is a waste of time, Baran. Get rid of him now.”

“You should be more patient, Vekor,” Baran advised. “It might be rewarding. We will wait. Let the memory of his pain argue with him for a while. It might change his attitude.” He gestured to the Romulan woman, who picked Riker up by the arm and dragged him to a seat on the other side of the room.

Narik also stood. “Vekor is right. We should get rid of him. It’s dangerous to have someone from Starfleet on board.”

“Dangerous?” Baran asked with a chuckle. “It might be profitable. A Starfleet commander is a valuable hostage.”

Vekor crossed her arms and angrily replied, “Starfleet won’t negotiate with us, but they’ll pursue us as long as we have him.”

Baran looked at her and activated his device again, causing her to grunt and double over in pain. He said, “This discussion is over. Get back to your post, Vekor.”

Vekor glared at Baran, but when he met her expression with equal ferocity, she backed down.

Another person on the bridge Riker had not previously noticed turned from his console and said in an entirely familiar voice, “They’re right, Baran, and you know it. I say kill him. Now.”

Riker turned and couldn’t believe his eyes: it was Picard, dressed in mercenary clothing, a neural servo on his neck as well.

Picard looked down at Riker with utter contempt as he continued, “If he has nothing to give us, we should kill him now and be done with it.” He stepped down from the console area and

approached Baran. “Everyone seems to recognize that fact except you.”

“I don’t need a consensus to run this ship, Galen,” Baran warned.

Suddenly the lights began to flicker throughout the bridge, accompanied by the sounds of power fluctuations.

“What’s going on?” Baran demanded.

Narik hurriedly explained, “I’m bypassing the aft plasma couplings. The power loss should only last for a few seconds.”

As the power came back up, Baran said to Picard, “You should learn not to limit your options. Riker could be very useful to us in the future.”

Picard – or rather, Galen as he was clearly known to these people – scoffed, “He may not be as useful as you think, if this is the same Riker that I’ve heard about.”

“What Riker might that be?” Riker asked, giving Picard ample leeway to spin whatever yarn he required and hopefully embed some kind of clue to what was going on.

“Commander of the Enterprise, formerly assigned to the USS Hood,” Picard said.

“That’s right,” Riker confirmed.

“Then you must be the William T. Riker with a history of insubordination,” Picard said. He turned to Baran and explained, “He was even once relieved of duty, during the Cardassian incident at Minos Korva.”

Riker understood the references; each was a time when he’d been relieved of duty because he’d done what he believed to be right in terms of protecting a commanding officer. Picard was hinting that Riker should continue to protect his commanding officer – even at the expense of Starfleet protocol – because the captain also clearly wanted him to seem like a less-than-stellar officer so he’d be no threat to these mercenaries.

Baran asked, “How do you know all this?”

Picard smugly replied, “Look, I’ve been smuggling artifacts from Federation sites for years. You can’t help developing a

familiarity with certain Starfleet personnel. If we hadn't have captured him, he'd probably have ended up before a court martial."

"I've gotten out of them before," Riker said, playing along.

Picard sneered, "Look, he's no use to us. Finish him now. Let me do it for you." But at that moment the entire ship lurched and went into warp.

The Romulan woman directed another woman on the bridge to watch Riker as she and Picard rushed to consoles.

Vekor said, "We're accelerating!"

Baran demanded of Narik, "What have you done?"

"It has nothing to do with my repairs," Narik protested. "I think there's a malfunction in the engine's intermix chamber."

The Romulan woman said, "Plasma pressure is rising."

"Where's the malfunction?" asked Baran.

"It could be one of any thirty subsystems. It'll take time to locate," Narik said.

But the Romulan woman warned, "I don't think you're going to have the chance. Plasma pressure has reached critical levels."

"Seal off the intermix chamber," Baran ordered.

"I can't. The override sequence won't engage," Vekor replied.

Picard said, "The antimatter flow regulator is locked open."

"Logic subsystems still not responding," the Romulan woman announced.

Baran pushed Picard aside as he demanded, "Get out of the way!"

"Plasma pressure has exceeded maximum levels. Eight percent above critical and rising," the Romulan woman said.

"We have to jettison the core," said Narik.

Baran turned to him in disbelief at the very suggestion. "No, we'll be stranded here!"

Picard looked directly at Riker and said, "The flow regulator is frozen."

Riker, who had been quietly watching the tense scene before him, suddenly understood: Picard had set up a chance for him to save the day and thus make himself indispensable to the mercenary

crew. He said, “Let me do it. I’ve had a lot of experience with this sort of system failure. I might be able to do something.”

The Romulan woman announced, “Plasma pressure is eleven percent above critical. The containment fields are beginning to degrade.”

Baran nodded to Riker and shouted, “Go!”

“Flow regulator is not responding to manual override. Containment fields won’t hold much longer,” Narik said, sounding increasingly desperate.

But Riker swooped in, knowing exactly what to look for. “Looks like you’ve got a control logic lockout in your regulator subsystem.” The ship lurched again. “I’m going to attempt to run an active bypass through the plasma flow convertor.” He looked to Narik and added, “You! Start running phase-lock feedback through that regulator. I want about a six second delay.”

“What are you saying? I don’t take orders from you,” Narik protested.

But Baran ordered, “You do as he says.”

The Romulan woman said, “Plasma pressure is fourteen percent above critical.”

Baran warned Riker, “If you fail –”

“We’ll all be dead anyway. Just need a few more seconds,” Riker said, entering commands on a separate console pulled down from the main one. As he entered the sequence, he flashed a quick grin up at Picard.

“Plasma pressure is dropping.” The ship lurched again but the power began to stabilize. “We’re back into safe levels,” the Romulan woman announced.

Riker closed the lower console as Picard gave him a barely perceptible nod. He then turned to Baran and said, “If you want to make sure that doesn’t happen again, you’d better re-initiate your regulator sub-compressors. A full diagnostic of your intermix chamber wouldn’t hurt either.”

Baran looked at Narik and said, “Do it.” The latter glared, but then slunk off to get to work. Baran then ordered, “Put him in quarters for now,” pointing at Riker.

Riker raised his hand to indicate he’d go willingly, and as he passed Picard he smugly asked, “You still wish you’d killed me?” But as he was escorted off of the bridge, he had to suppress how elated he was to have found his captain alive, even amidst these tense and unusual circumstances. Riker felt very much as if he could handle anything these mercenaries threw at him now that he and Picard once again had each other’s back.



Stardate 47138.5 (Friday 02/20/2370, 13:15) – Enterprise – Anna’s Lab

Anna sat at the table, fiddling with one the end of one of her braids and staring into space as she pondered the problem of how to find the slippery ship. That’s how she was thinking of it already: oily somehow, in a space context. *Or soapy*, she thought, *like a bar of soap that keeps shooting out of your hand in the shower*.

She found herself fixating on the soap idea because when she imagined soap in her hand and how squeezing would jettison it forward, it was not unlike warp bubbles squeezing the ship through space. She wondered if there was indeed something you could do to the hull of a ship that made it more “space-soapy”, her new internal term for such a phenomenon, if it even existed.

She looked down at the floor at her cast-aside leg, glaring at it mildly. She wanted to go back to her quarters, get her own bar of soap from the shower, and fiddle with it to consider this concept more, and thus was simultaneously wondering if it was worth even putting the leg on for such a short trip down the corridor. After all,

she'd never needed a prosthetic all of those years on the up-turned Baltimore; she only needed it now because of large, open spaces where hopping became tiresome or the stares of others were upsetting.

Anna bent down, picked up the leg, and banged it onto the table before her. Compared to the surgically attached bio-limbs, the prosthetic really was quite basic. The top socket had been mapped to her stump for optimal contact and comfort, but it still could get painful by the end of a long day of too much standing or walking, or even if she just had it on too long and irritated her skin. There was a small neural interface there that pressed against the fibular nerves to give rudimentary connection between her brain and the artificial musculature of the leg which in turn allowed her to walk fluidly and even point and flex her toe, but it wasn't nearly as elaborate or effective as the surgical version. It was like a cortical stimulator: an electro-bludgeoning tool of sorts that made the brain pay attention to a signal more than any kind of refined neural feedback system.

The internals were otherwise a primitive myoelectric architecture which hadn't been updated much in over two hundred years since the surgical bio-limbs had become so overwhelmingly preferred. It was only ever supposed to be a stopgap, so it didn't matter to medical personnel that it wasn't perfect, particularly on sideways movement. Whenever Anna complained she was told to concede to the surgery.

She'd defied them by getting reasonably good at using it anyway, even learning to land on it from jumps without hurting herself or falling over. The shock absorbers in the leg weren't great, but they were enough, especially since she let her full left leg do most of the work.

Shock absorbers are energy sinks, she thought. My leg uses magnetorheological dampers to convert the kinetic energy of a step's impact to dissipated heat, controlled by the leg's electromagnets for a variable viscosity at different stages of the gait. Magnetorheological fluids rearrange their magnetic particles

in response to the electromagnetic field to create chain-like structures and reduce flow, effectively transitioning between liquid and solid on the fly as needed by the damper unit. So why not cover your hull with MRF, controlled by electromagnets that constantly alter how the hull would be perceived by sensors?

Anna hopped up from her chair and crossed to the console on the other side of room, plopping into the chair there and hammering at the controls to research MRF usage on hulls. At first she thought she wouldn't get far without asking Geordi's permission to access Starfleet files on the subject, but she was surprised to see she'd been granted officer-level access well beyond what he'd told her he was setting up for her.

She paused her research, hands in the air over the controls, caught up in a moment of pure imposter syndrome. *Why would Geordi let me have this level of access? I mean it's not the secret stuff, obviously, but even ensign level is more than a civilian should have, isn't it? Is this a trick? A trap? To see if I'll poke around where I don't belong? Or a mistake? That's it. He's made a mistake. I shouldn't be trusted like this. I mean I can be, because I can get into any system I want anyway and I don't because I'm a good person, or I try to be, except when I can't, and then...*

Anna closed her eyes, recognizing that she was getting herself stuck in an unpleasant cycle of thought that never ended well. She forced herself to take a deep breath and get back on the task. *If Geordi has made an error, he can fix it later.*

She began speed-reading through the files that came up and learned that several pirate vessels had been captured about ten years prior with MRF fibre networks on their hulls. The Starfleet researchers at the time had determined that these networks gave some level of protection from the sensors of the day, but the document noted that upgrades in sensor technology had rendered such hull designs useless.

Anna leaned back in the seat to think some more. *Okay, but what if the MRF system has also improved? MRF isn't ferrofluid because ferrofluids have much finer particles that are subject to*

Brownian motion and thus have far more applications across a bunch of techniques including significant and highly-controlled heat absorption via thermomagnetic convection. So what if someone's figured out a way to build a ferrofluid network over a hull that can absorb sensor energy to redirect reflection so the sensor doesn't get a reply from its signal?

She grinned, but then wrinkled her nose. *I mean what a pain it'd be to manage, far more trouble than its worth, unless your whole business was trying to be a slippery ship evading authorities in the first place...*

Anna grinned again and spun the chair around in excitement. *So if you recalibrated your sensors to be specifically tuned to a magnetic-based ferrofluid, the at least partially diffracted signal might be enough to give us a blip of them.* She paused spinning when she realized the sensors would also have to be taught to interpret that information as something other than noise. *But I can do that, I know I can,* she thought, spinning once more.

“Computer, play a shuffled assortment of Broadway cast recordings from 1900 through 2020.”

The computer beeped and began to play “I Get a Kick Out of You” from *Anything Goes*. Anna looked at her leg on the table again, laughed, and began to poke at the console to run preliminary virtual models. Shortly thereafter she was hopping around the room making physical models to test as well.

CHAPTER TEN

Stardate 47138.8 (Friday 02/20/2370, 15:53) – Barradas Three

La Forge handed Worf a PADD detailing his team's search results. Worf nodded and said, "This is similar to the other teams' findings as well. We should inform Commander Data."

"Yeah we should, but hang on a second," La Forge said. "Are you okay? You seem more, you know, tense than usual."

"I am concerned about Commander Riker," Worf said. "Every moment he is held captive is another moment too long."

La Forge nodded. "It's been a hard week. I guess it's hard to stay positive."

"I am positive that we must act quickly to pursue his captors," Worf grumbled. "Especially if they are indeed the same people who killed Captain Picard. Justice must be served."

"Uh, right," La Forge replied. "Okay let's find Data, then."

The two walked up the hill and through the sparse trees to the next settlement ruins, where they found Data scanning more of the burnt pits with his tricorder. He rose as they approached.

Worf said, "The search teams have reported in. They found several archaeological sites. Each one has been looted."

"It's possible that the microcrystalline damage I found in these indentations was the result of some kind of high energy transporter beam, but I still don't understand," La Forge said, pointing to the one Data had just been scanning. "There's nothing here that's particularly valuable. Why would anyone want to steal any of these things?"

"Perhaps these artifacts have a special value to the Romulans," Data surmised.

Worf stiffened. "The Romulans?"

“These structures were built by the Debrune,” Data explained. “That race is an ancient offshoot of the Romulans. The ruins on the planet where Captain Picard was killed were also Romulan in origin.”

“The leader of the group that attacked us was Romulan. Perhaps they are controlling the mercenaries,” Worf theorized.

“The question remains, why are they stealing these artifacts?” Data asked. “Perhaps we should collate our findings back aboard the ship and continue our research with computer assistance there.” With that, he turned and began rounding up the search teams.

La Forge looked to Worf and shrugged, but the latter merely glowered and strode off to collect his own team.



Back on the bridge, Data and La Forge brought up a local star chart with parameters specific to the situation at hand. Data said, “There are several archaeological sites in this sector containing ruins which are Romulan in origin.” He pointed to the list on the screen. “These are the locations that were attacked by the mercenary vessel.”

“Looks like they did a pretty thorough job,” La Forge said.

“The only sites not been attacked were on Calder Two, Yadalla Prime, and Draken Four,” Data said.

“Yadalla and Draken are at the far edge of the sector, but Calder Two? That’s less than a day from here at maximum warp.”

Data nodded. “That would be their next likely target.”

La Forge pulled up the records for the Calder system. “According to this, there’s a Federation outpost at Calder Two.”

“But it is only a small science station. It has limited defensive capabilities. I do not believe it could withstand an attack from the mercenary ship.” Data turned and went to Worf, who was standing at attention beside his former tactical post. “Mr. Worf, send a

message to the Federation outpost on Calder Two. Advise them that if a ship matching the configuration of the mercenary vessel approaches, they should attempt to delay it until our arrival.”

Worf nodded curtly and began the task.

Data returned to the captain’s chair, ordering the helm along the way, “Ensign, take us out of orbit. Set course for the Calder system, warp nine.”

The ensign said, “Aye sir,” and the Enterprise was once again in hopeful pursuit of the mercenary vessel.



Stardate 47138.9 (Friday 02/20/2370, 16:45) – Mercenary Vessel

Back in the room he’d first awoken in, Riker sat at the little table, rubbing at the neural servo in his neck. He wondered if he and Picard could somehow get together long enough to remove each others’, or if it actually required medical expertise to disconnect.

Once again the realization that Picard was alive filled Riker with joy. He had so many questions and concerns about their situation, but hope was renewed and with it came a sense of bravado and eagerness to swashbuckle his way to freedom and rescue of the captain.

Just then the door opened and Riker braced for another altercation, but it was Picard.

“We don’t have much time,” Picard said, entering and quickly checking every corner of the room for anyone else or obvious listening devices. Once he seemed satisfied, his expression softened and he said, “It’s good to see you, Will. I didn’t expect to meet you here.”

Riker stood, shocked and confused by Picard’s seemingly casual greeting. *Doesn’t he know what we’ve been through?* he

thought. “I was looking to find the people who killed you on the surface there at Barradas. A witness at a bar on Dessica Two said they saw you vaporized.”

Picard nodded. “These mercenaries use weapons that can activate their transporter. It gives them the opportunity to beam things quickly, just by firing at them. That’s what they did to me.”

“I don’t understand any of this. Who are these people? What are you doing involved with them?”

Picard directed Riker back to sit at the table again. “The site that I wanted to study had been raided. A lot of the artifacts had been stolen. The site had been practically destroyed,” he said angrily. “I wanted to find out who was responsible. I tracked them to that bar on Dessica Two but I asked too many questions. They captured me. They wanted to find out how much I knew about their operation.”

“And then you became part of their crew?” Riker asked incredulously.

“I had already convinced them I was a smuggler looking for work, and that my name was Galen. I offered to help them appraise the artifacts that they had stolen, but then they press-ganged me into full service.” Picard leaned in closer to emphasize, “Will, these aren’t common thieves. They are stealing Romulan artifacts from archaeological sites throughout this sector. Baran has me analyzing each one of them for a particular particle signature. Will, they are looking for a specific artifact.”

“Why?”

“That’s what we have to find out. Baran is the key. I think that he knows more about what we’re really looking for than anyone else on this ship. I want you to get close to him. Try and get his confidence.”

Riker nodded. “That’s why you set up the engine failure, because you knew that I’d be able to fix it.”

“He also believes that you’re a less than perfect Starfleet officer.”

Riker grinned.

“Will, I want you to play into that role. Baran and I...well, he doesn't care very much for me, but he has to tolerate me because he needs my help with these artifacts.” Picard stood. “But if you and I become enemies, then there's a better chance of you and he becoming friends.”

“All right. I'll do what I can.”

Before they could plot further, the door opened again and Picard lashed out to backhand Riker in the face, knocking him to the floor. Riker looked up at Picard in bafflement until he realized that Baran had entered.

“What are you doing here?” Baran demanded of Picard.

“Getting some answers, because you can't get him to talk.”

Baran pressed the button on his device, sending Picard to his knees in agony. “No one conducts an interrogation on this ship without my permission. Is that understood?”

Picard got back onto his feet, glared at Baran, stepped over Riker, and then twisted enough to kick Riker solidly in his side.

Riker let out a genuine “Oof,” from the impact, because even though Picard took care to use the top of his foot instead of his toe, it still hurt. Winded for a moment, he gave Picard a look of questioning surprise, but then let it shift into a facade of a glare.

Picard left and Baran scrutinized Riker carefully, so Riker played up his expression of outrage. But Baran said nothing, and left a moment later as well.



Picard sat down at a console on the bridge with an air of defiance, but in reality he had no idea how to feel. It was good to see Will again, good to have someone on his side, good to regain a glimmer of hope for a positive end to this mess, but all of that was up against the guilt he felt for getting his first officer embroiled any of it. He'd hoped his crew was looking for him, but he never

thought for a moment that Baran would dare to brazenly abduct a Starfleet officer. Surely he had to know he'd poked a hornet's nest?

Which meant, of course, Picard had to do everything he could to keep Riker safe until the Enterprise could somehow catch up with them. He was hopeful his plan would work, but shifting from fearing for himself to fearing for his friend and colleague was exhausting.

Thus it sent a fresh chill down Picard's spine when Baran strode onto the bridge and announced, "Our next objective should prove an interesting challenge. We're headed for the Sakethan burial mounds on Calder Two."

Picard knew there was a Starfleet outpost there, and that its defences were likely no match for this ship. Baran hadn't actually killed anyone on this mission yet – that Picard knew of – but he certainly threatened it often enough, and was clearly not above torture and abduction. Would he dare fire on a Starfleet outpost? Or would he just capture more Starfleet personnel and provoke even more of a response?

Picard knew needed to be careful, but also to dissuade Baran from any action in that system. He decided to ride the dangerous line of hinting that Baran was a fool to go up against Starfleet to stir up opposition in the rest of the crew, but not go so far as to say it directly and risk Baran's reprisals. "What?" he asked gruffly. "Calder Two isn't just another archaeological site, you know. There's a Federation outpost there."

Baran shrugged. "I don't see that as a problem."

"It's defended by Starfleet. You don't think they're just going to stand by while we walk in there and take whatever we want?"

Baran was clearly irritated, but not rising to the bait. "I'm familiar with the tactical situation."

Vekor, however, seemed more worried. "What are their defences?"

"Nothing to worry about," Baran replied dismissively. "They have a type four deflector shield protecting the outpost and the ruins."

Picard tried to fan the flames of Vekor's justified concern. "They also have a minimum of two phaser banks and possibly photon torpedoes. Is that enough to worry about?"

Tallera, the Romulan woman who'd dragged Riker around earlier, narrowed her eyes at Picard. "How do you know so much about this outpost?"

He'd already prepared an answer for that. "Because I tried to smuggle a Sakethan glyph stone out of there nearly two years ago. I barely got away in one piece."

"Our weapons are more than a match for their defences," Baran said with an arrogant air. "I anticipate that we'll be able to destroy the outpost within fifteen minutes. Then we'll send in Tallera and the landing party to secure the relics."

Picard had to suppress yet another chill at Baran's casual willingness to murder the outpost crew. He wondered if he'd be able to destroy the ship before it got there, but while sacrificing himself was readily acceptable, sacrificing Will was less palatable, even knowing that Will would go along with it. Somehow, that made the notion even worse.

But the thought of him prompted another idea, so he proposed, "Why don't we use Riker? He's a Starfleet Commander. He could talk us past the outpost security without raising their suspicions. Then when their shields go down, we can beam the artifacts up here without ever leaving the ship."

"Why would Riker help us?" Vekor asked with a sneer. "Just because he's out of favour with Starfleet doesn't mean that he's ready to betray them."

But Picard seized upon his own fear for the outpost to openly project it onto Will instead. "If he doesn't help us, we'll have to destroy the outpost and kill everyone on it. He's still a Starfleet officer. He won't want to take innocent lives if he can possibly prevent it."

Tallera scrutinized him, and then walked over to Baran where she quietly said, "The last time we engaged Starfleet, we lost a

man. We can't afford any more casualties. If we can avoid a battle, I think we should."

Picard was unaware of a previous altercation between these mercenaries and Starfleet and he still hadn't fully figured out the relative hierarchy on board, but there was something about how Tallera spoke to Baran that made him wonder who was really in charge. Tallera had a neural servo on her neck but he'd never seen Baran activate it, and now Baran seemed unusually receptive to Tallera's opinion in a way he certainly wasn't with anyone else.

"All right, we'll try it," Baran said. "We'll be at Calder Two within fifteen hours. You all know your duties. I want this ship prepared for battle, in case your plan doesn't work," he said to Picard.

But Picard was immensely grateful for the chance to save the crew of the outpost. He knew he needed to keep Baran happy enough, stoke the others to distrust Baran's leadership further, and somehow get back to Will to let him know what was going on.



Stardate 47139.0 (Friday 02/20/2370, 18:08) – Enterprise – Anna's Lab

As "I Won't Send Roses" from *Mack and Mabel* came on, Anna pulled a face of disgust and said, "Ugh, Computer, remove that song from the playlist. In fact remove that entire album." There weren't many musicals in her preferred era she didn't like, but that was one of them, particularly that song. She'd long ago accepted that nobody would ever bring her flowers or treat her romantically in any way, but a song about a man boasting about being cruelly unromantic was the exact opposite of the escapist fantasy she sought in her beloved show tunes.

She'd been curating the list as she worked, wishing she had the one she'd built over years on the Baltimore. At first on that ship, she'd let the computer serve up all recorded musicals up to the present, but quickly scaled it back to the advent of moving pictures through to the Great Pause of 2020. There were a few she liked after that period, but not many; the successive pandemics, global poverty, climate destruction, and ensuing devastation of World War III had resulted in a new generation of theatre based on revolution and cynicism, not the triumphs of love and beauty that so charmed her in the older set.

When "Show People" from *Curtains* began next, her smile returned. She liked the puns in that song, and found herself wanting to share them with Data the next time he was available. That thought reminded her where she actually was, because she'd lost herself in the music and the research. A chill went down her spine as the weight of the dangerous reality around her along Picard's death came over her once again, but she shook it all off and put her head back into the work and her heart back into the music.

There was no reason to believe that her theory of the mercenary vessel's hull being covered with either magnetorheological fluids or ferrofluids was even likely, but it was the best idea she'd come up with and she was deriving enormous satisfaction in running with it; enough to block out all of the other scary stuff going on. Singing along to her favourite songs while simultaneously calculating calibration tables for the variable frequency EM flux sensor to emit EM pulses designed to diffract against different concentrations of the two fluid types – or possibly combinations of both – was the most fun she'd had in a very, very long time.

Every once in awhile when she was waiting on the computer or there was a gap between songs, she indulged herself in a little fantasy that this research would indeed be useful, or perhaps even the key to finding the abducted Commander Riker. She already disliked him, but what a boon it'd be if her wild theory was right and set the Enterprise on the path to rescuing him! *Everyone will*

like me then, she thought with a giddy smile and a twirl around the room on her real leg, since the artificial one was once again sitting in the corner. *If I show them what I can do and it saves the day, they'll stop seeing me as merely a potentially useful freak and instead actually want me around.* She gleefully imagined their gratitude, their acceptance, and everything else she'd longed for since the day she launched from Covaris Two but had never found.

Yet at every moment, self-doubt lingered. For every fantasy of preening at applause, there was the knowledge that what she was doing was probably useless. For every joyous twirl at the mere notion of impressing Data and Geordi, there was the stark reality that they were doing all of the real work and she was just mucking about in nonsense.

But then “Consider Yourself” from *Oliver!* came on, and she found herself desperately imagining that the others were singing it to her as she'd imagined hearing from the warp drive on her first day, that they'd taken to her so strong that she was now at home and one of the family.

Family, she thought, sighing again with the mixed feelings that still lingered regarding Picard's death. *Okay, I'll never be family here, but I can belong. Oh please, please let me find the right answer so I can belong.*

But then a terrible thought occurred to her: what if researching ways to hide a ship from sensors counted as a violation of the Treaty of Algeron? She only knew of it insofar as she'd been warned on her first day at Daystrom that nobody was allowed to even think about cloaking technology, in large part because so many people wanted to research it that they were all ensuring nobody else got to do it. Anna knew almost nothing about Romulans – neither past wars nor the recent resurgence, nor even how Romulan history played into anything that was going on around her – but she knew that cloaking technology was strictly off-limits because of that treaty.

She plopped down into her chair, disheartened and worried. What if instead of finding the key to chasing down the mercenary

vessel, she accidentally stumbled into technology that was too close to what was banned in the treaty? What if her poking around got the whole Enterprise into trouble? Or the whole Federation? What if she accidentally started another war?

No, I'm not important enough to do that. Nobody will care about what I'm doing here except for Geordi, she thought. And it isn't a cloak anyway, because the vessel remains visible to the eye. It's just sensor trickery. Real cloaks use the deflector shields to bend light so the ship is wholly invisible to the naked eye, cameras, sensors, pretty much everything. Not that I'm supposed to know that. And I definitely could figure out how to use the shields for that or anything else I wanted to because shields are my thing way more than sensors, but I'm not thinking about cloaking devices except that I am so I really should stop because I don't want to get in trouble and blow this whole thing.

The song changed to “Anything But Lonely” from *Aspects of Love*. Anna glared at the computer console and muttered, “Yeah, okay, I hear you. I won't risk even thinking about stuff that's going to get me kicked off the ship. Geordi said to think of ways to adjust the sensors so that's what I'm doing. I am definitely not going to develop an entire MRF or ferrofluid tube network for hulls that can evade sensors, and that sample over there doesn't count because it's too small. This is all just for sensor calibration so you can stop threatening me with songs about isolation, thank you very much.”

As usual, the computer didn't answer her unaddressed rant, so she resolutely sighed and set up her next experiment to test the latest batch of calibrations against her working model.



Stardate 47139.0 (Friday 02/20/2370, 18:08) – Mercenary Vessel – Cargo Hold

At the same moment Picard was also engaged in research, oblivious to the parallel since he'd banished all thoughts of the situation with Anna White. He needed to make a show of continuing to examine the artifacts while actually plotting several ways to prevent Baran from killing anyone at the Calder outpost, so whatever issues awaited him should he actually ever make it back to the Enterprise had to be shelved.

He took another artifact from the bin, checked its label, and placed it into the middle of his equipment. "Computer, reset diagnostic for new sample, lot number 478-B. Access spectral analysis and begin scan, mode three."

The computer replied, "Scan complete. Terikon particle decay profile does not fall within specified reference range. Probability of match: zero-point-zero-four percent."

Picard noted the results in his log, set that artifact to the side, and selected another one. "Computer, reset diagnostic for new sample, lot number 369-B. Access spectral analysis, mode two, begin scan."

As he was setting it up Tallera entered, but he ignored her.

"Baran wants to see the analysis of the last lot," she said. "He thinks you're moving a little slowly."

Picard was entirely genuine when he grumbled, "You can tell Baran if he wants the analysis done faster, he can do it himself. If he wants it done correctly, he can wait."

Tallera flipped a switch on the equipment, shutting it down. "Do you enjoy living dangerously, Galen? Baran can kill you in an instant if he activates his control device."

Again, he answered truthfully. "I doubt that he'll do that. I've increased the accuracy of the identification process by a factor of ten. I'm the best person to analyze these artifacts. Baran knows that." *I just never knew my hobby would one day keep me alive like this*, he thought. He shot Tallera a look but otherwise kept his eyes down, an effective manipulative technique he'd observed many times by watching those who advised and catered to the powerful. He'd seen how the appearance of deference coupled with words of

defiance appeased those in charge while simultaneously provoking them to consider concepts to which they'd otherwise be resistant, especially coming from a subordinate. It had definitely been working for him on this ship in terms of stoking other members of the crew against Baran.

Tallera may not have fallen for it directly, but her posture indicated that she was at least partly mollified by the faux deference. "He may need you now but I know Baran, and I can tell you he's not going to back down forever. You accomplish nothing by provoking him."

The fact that Tallera was standing around pointlessly lecturing him intrigued Picard, so he decided to see if she'd let anything slip. "I don't like operating in the dark. If I knew what the point of this mission were, why I was analyzing these relics..."

But Tallera didn't take the bait. She chided, "If Baran felt it were wise to let the crew know that, I'm sure he would have."

Picard decided to go for broke. Looking Tallera square in the eye he asked, "Do you know what all this is about?"

Tallera slyly replied, "What Baran knows, I know."

That's it, he thought. She's bragging about something and wants me to know it. Whatever the nature of their relationship, she sees herself as his superior in some way or other and doesn't like playing second fiddle. She's looking for an excuse to assert herself, and I'm going to leave it open for her to do so. "Then what's going on here? Why are we risking our lives taking these artifacts? Who wants them?"

"I see no reason to tell you anything, but you can rest assured I don't necessarily share everything I know with Baran, either," she said, coming around to stand very close to him. "This conversation, for example, will stay between us."

She thinks she's toying with me. She sees herself above all of us and imagines that I'd be willingly beholden to her. I need to flip this, to plant a seed against Baran in her mind under the guise of not caring about which one of them is on top. If I can make her think I'm slightly more her ally than his, I just might make some

headway on all of this and simultaneously prevent an attack on the outpost at Calder Two, Picard thought. He scoffed and said with utmost confidence, “You can tell Baran every word that I’ve said. He knows that I don’t think much of him as a leader.”

“He’s been in charge of this crew for a long time.”

He decided to gamble that the neural servo on her neck was only there for show, but make her consider if she was actually at risk with it. “Baran wouldn’t last five minutes as captain if he didn’t have that control device. The crew follow him because they have no choice. Baran’s power is based on fear and intimidation,” Picard said with genuine disgust.

“That almost sounds like a prelude to mutiny.”

And now to sow the seed, he thought. “If someone were to challenge him, the rest of the crew would follow.”

“I was right. You do like living dangerously,” she said, coming back around behind him.

Picard stared at the artifact and devices on the table, waiting patiently for Tallera to reveal to him whether his plan was successful or not.

Thus when she said, “I like you, Galen,” he knew he’d gotten into her head exactly as he’d hoped. She continued, “I can tolerate a lot from someone like you, but only to a point. I intend to complete this mission successfully and get what’s been promised me. If it looks as though you’re getting in the way of that, I’ll deal with you myself.”

Tallera left the room, and Picard knew he’d won the match.

Now all there is to worry about is the rest of the game, he thought as he returned to scanning.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Stardate 47140.6 (Saturday 02/21/2370, 07:58) – Mercenary Vessel
– Bridge

First thing in the morning, Tallera was at Riker's door. She dragged him back towards the bridge, informing him, "We are about to reach Calder Two and you have work to do."

Once on the bridge, Baran barked, "Get the outpost to lower their shields."

Riker was about to protest when he noticed Picard looking directly at him in a way that he knew indicated to go with it.

"Do it now or we'll blast them to pieces," Baran snapped.

Riker understood this was his chance to save the lives of those on board the outpost. "I could tell them we're aware of an incoming attack and we want to establish a safety net in advance."

"Whatever you think will work," Baran said dismissively, stepping to the side as Riker initiated communication with the outpost.

Riker wasn't confident about this plan since he knew he wouldn't trust an order out of nowhere from an officer on a non-Starfleet vessel, but if this was what Picard wanted him to do, he'd give it his best. "This is Commander William T. Riker. I am on a mission to protect your outpost from a credible threat."

"Hello Commander, I'm Lieutenant Sanders. What threat? We haven't heard about anything."

"I am not at liberty to divulge the specifics at this time, but I require access to the surface. Please drop your shields immediately."

"Commander, no one is allowed on the surface without prior authorization from the Federation Science Council," Sanders replied.

“I’m aware of that, Lieutenant, but your outpost is in imminent danger of attack. I would like to station security personnel on the surface for your protection. Now, I’m ordering you to drop your shields.”

Sanders very calmly replied, *“I’m sorry, sir, but the regulations are very specific. I can’t do it. If you’d like, you can remain in orbit until we contact the Science Council, but we’re experiencing some communication difficulties right now, so that –”*

Baran reached over Riker’s shoulder and terminated the transmission. “This isn’t working. They’re delaying on purpose. Someone has warned them.” He rose and looked to Vekor at the next console. “Charge main disruptor array. Destroy the outpost!”

But before Vekor could obey, Picard leaped across and knocked her aside, shouting, “No, there’s no time for that! Starfleet will be here any minute!”

Baran rushed to Picard, demanding, “What are you doing?”

“I’m configuring the disruptors to fire a phase resonant pulse,” Picard explained as he worked the console. “If I can hit their shield generator with precisely the right frequency, I should be able to take it out with one shot. Firing.” There was a pause, then he confirmed, “Their shields are down.”

Baran turned to Tallera. “The artifacts should be located in several small structures arranged in staggered formations.”

“I’m scanning,” she replied. “I think I’ve found them.”

“Lock coordinates and start bringing them up.”

The transporter pad lit up and three broken bits of pottery materialized.

“There should be at least two more pieces down there,” Baran said.

“I’ve lost transporter lock,” Tallera explained.

Picard said, “They managed to get their shields back up.”

“I need those artifacts,” Baran growled. He turned to Picard and ordered, “Lock all disruptors on target. This time I want that outpost destroyed.”

Picard began to reach for the console, considering what else he could possibly do other than fire on the outpost. But just as he was weighing his options, the ship shook with incoming weapons fire.



Stardate 47140.6 (Saturday 02/21/2370, 08:04) – Enterprise –
Bridge

As soon as the Enterprise dropped out of warp at Calder Two, Worf said, “The outpost is undamaged with their shields up. Mercenary vessel has weapons up and targeted on the outpost.”

“Red alert, shields up, and fire at their shield deflectors,” Data ordered.

Worf fired and then reported, “Direct hit on their aft deflectors. They are undamaged.”

“Ensign, scan for Starfleet com badge signals. Is Commander Riker aboard that ship?” Data asked.

Ensign Giusti replied, “I can’t tell, sir. Sensors are unable to penetrate their hull.”

“Open a channel,” Data ordered.

Worf replied, “Open.”

Data said, “This is the Federation Starship Enterprise. You are ordered to stand down. Drop your shields and prepare to be boarded.”



Baran turned to Riker in fury. “You sent them a message. You told them where to find us!”

“That’s ridiculous. When did I have a chance? You’ve had me locked in that room all night! They are tracking you because they know you grabbed me at Barradas!” Riker retorted.

Baran pointed to the remote that activated the neural devices. “This is set to kill.” He grabbed Riker by the arm and shoved him towards the centre of the bridge. “Order your ship to disengage. Activate visual.”

The mercenary vessel’s screen lit up with the view of the Enterprise’s bridge. Riker watched Data and Troi react hopefully to his appearance. He desperately wanted to tell them what was going on, particularly with Captain Picard, but he knew he couldn’t safely even hint at any of it.

Data asked, “*Commander. Are you all right?*”

Baran hissed, “Tell him!”

Riker all-too-calmly replied, “Mr. Data, withdraw the Enterprise. That’s an order.”

“*That is impossible, sir,*” Data responded.

Riker knew Data was not one for declaring anything impossible without absolute certainty. *He’s letting me know that he can tell something is going on beyond appearances and he’s attuned to my every word and gesture to try to figure it out. I need to remember to thank him for his meticulous nature when I get to see him in person again, which hopefully will be soon.*

Data continued, “*The ship you are on has violated a Federation outpost. It is my duty to stop it.*”

Riker thought, *He’s trying to get clarification on what to do next. I need to assure him to do what I ask even if he appears to be refusing me.* Trying to project a lack of concern – in part so Troi would pick up on it and recognize his blatant duplicity – Riker said, “I’m your commanding officer. I’m giving you a direct order. Understood?”

Data gave him an inquisitive look and asked, “*Commander, if you could explain –*”

But Riker cut him off, letting him know he was not able to explain. “I’ve never explained my orders before. I’m not about to

start now.” With that, he ended the transmission, hoping his hints to Data were strong enough.

Riker went back to Baran and said, “I’m not about to let him blow this ship into space. If I can set up a low level com link between the two ships, I can use my personal command codes. I can deactivate their shields.”

“Do it,” Baran agreed, and Narik stood over Riker’s shoulder watching his actions closely.

Riker suppressed a grin for how easy that was, because he knew his next action would give Data the ultimate hint that nothing was as it seemed. He pushed Narik aside and began to enter his codes.



Worf reported, “Commander, we are receiving some kind of signal from the mercenary ship. These are Commander Riker’s access codes. He is attempting to shut down our shields.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Troi said. “He knows those codes would have been changed as soon as he was captured.”

“That is correct, Counsellor. He does know.” Data stood and ordered, “Mr. Worf, prepare to drop the shields.”

“Sir, we would be totally defenceless.”

“I am aware of that.”

Worf protested, “Sir, as soon as they see us –”

Data turned abruptly and firmly said, “Mr. Worf, that is an order.”

Worf and Troi exchanged a concerned look, but Worf said “Aye, sir,” and lowered the shields.



Riker reported, "It worked. Their shields are dropping."

Off to the side, Picard breathed a sigh of relief.

Baran said, "Fire!"

Picard obeyed, secure in the knowledge that he'd already set the ship's phasers too low to significantly damage the Enterprise, and that he'd managed to do even more while everyone was focused on Riker. For the first time since Nafir, he finally dared to hope.



The Enterprise shook with the impact of the phaser blast.

"Direct hit to the port nacelle," Worf reported. "Only minimal damage." A moment later the ship rocked again. "Hit to the starboard nacelle. Still, no appreciable damage."

"Will must've done something to their weapons," Troi surmised.

"I believe you are right, Counsellor. It is now up to us to play along," Data said. "Release inertial dampers and cut power to Decks Thirty-One through Thirty-Seven."

Ensign Giusti replied, "Aye sir."

Data continued, "Set phasers to twenty five percent. Return fire."

"Aye, sir," Worf said as he fired on the mercenary vessel once more.



Baran shouted, "Continue firing!"

But Picard pointed to the display and said, "I've lost three plasma relays on the disruptors. Auxiliary power is..." He turned to Baran. "Is not available."

“Transfer weapons control to my station,” Baran said. “There’s a way to bypass the relays and feed power –”

Another blast rocked the ship. Narik reported, “The antimatter containment units are starting to buckle!”

Tallera crossed the bridge to firmly but calmly advise Baran. “The Enterprise has been badly damaged but they still have superior firepower. If we remain here, we will be destroyed. The logical course of action is to withdraw.”

The ship lurched again, prompting Baran to sigh and grumble, “We’ve done enough damage. Let’s hope we got what we needed from the surface. Narik, set course one-eighty mark two-fifteen. Warp six. Initiate.”

With Baran’s back turned, Riker and Picard glanced at each other at the same time. Though it was only a fleeting moment, it was enough for them to reassure each other that this encounter had gone as well as they could have hoped, and that they were on to the next challenge together.



Back on the Enterprise, Ensign Guisti said, “They’re preparing to activate their warp drive, Commander.”

“Sir, we cannot track them with our sensors if they go to warp,” Worf insisted. “I can still disable them by –”

“I am aware of the tactical situation, Lieutenant. Let them go,” Data said flatly.

Once more Troi and Worf exchanged a look of concern, but complied with Data’s directive.

Guisti said, “Mercenary vessel has gone to warp. Long range sensors are still unable to track them.”

“Understood,” Data replied. He turned to Worf and Troi. “I am entirely certain we have acted within the wishes of Commander Riker, though he was unable to directly articulate them. His

communication was brief, but it is possible he has given us more information indirectly.”

Troi stood. “I could tell he was up to something and wanted me to know that, but I didn’t hear any obvious code at the time. Let me go over the recording bit by bit and see if I can tease out something more.”

Data nodded. “If he was speaking under duress, any code used would not be obvious. I will call Geordi up to assist you in case the Commander hid something in the transmission itself. I will also liaise with the outpost crew to get their report on what happened before we arrived.”



Stardate 47140.6 (Saturday 02/21/2370, 08:08) – Enterprise –
Anna’s Lab

The shaking of the ship had sent several of Anna’s bits and pieces of equipment falling from the table and side counter. She tried not to panic, even as the red alert lights and sounds began again. But then as she was on her way to the chair to get her leg back on for extra stability, the power went out so that the only light in the room was the pulsating red glow.

Anna screamed in terror and it echoed in the room once the music was off. “No no no no,” she shouted repeatedly as she scrambled to get back into the cupboard. But once she was on her hands and knees on the floor, she could feel the vibrations of the ship much more than usual, which made her freeze in place to try to figure out why. She realized she was shaking herself, so she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to calm down. It didn’t fully work, but she was at least able to steady her hands and be certain that yes, the floor was vibrating.

“The inertial dampers have been taken out,” she whispered. “Are we adrift? Computer, are we adrift?”

But there was no response without any power to the consoles.

“Okay. Okay. What am I supposed to do? What do I do now?” she asked herself, trying not to cry as her hands started shaking again.

A sudden banging on her door made her scream again, but then she heard a voice shouting through it, “Anna, it’s just me, Geordi. I’m going to open the door manually, okay?”

She didn’t answer, and a moment later Geordi was pushing the doors open to enter. He saw her sitting on the floor and rushed to her. “You all right? Are you hurt?”

“No, I mean yes, I mean...I’m not hurt but I am not okay.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about this. It looks worse than it is. I don’t know the details yet but we’ve shut off power and dampers to these decks to make it look like we took more damage than we did. That’s why I came right up here. I’m sorry all this is happening and I still haven’t briefed you on procedures. Here, come on up to the chair,” he said as he helped her up as he had before and sat across from her. Then he looked around at the scattered equipment. “What’s all this?”

“I’ve been testing some theories about how to hide a ship from long-range sensors, like you asked.”

“Okay, great. Any progress?”

“Well I –”

“*Data to La Forge,*” came Data’s voice over Geordi’s combadge.

He tapped it and said, “La Forge here.”

“*You are needed on the bridge,*” Data said.

“Got it. I’ll be up there in a minute.”

“*Understood,*” Data replied.

Geordi tapped his badge again to end the transmission. “Give me the five-second version.”

Anna nodded. “I’m developing calibration tables for the EM flux sensor to try varying the pulses in case their hull is utilizing

some kind of magnetorheological fluid or ferrofluid system designed to redirect standard EM pulse reflection.”

Geordi sat up straighter. “Because...if they had a system like that, the sensor wouldn’t get a reply from its signal so it’d have no idea anything was there.”

“Right.”

“That’s...brilliant.”

“It might not be what they’re doing,” she conceded.

“No, but it’s more than nothing. I’m going to try to get power restored to this deck as soon as possible, as soon as I get up to the bridge and Data lets me know what’s going on. Are you okay to continue? You don’t have to if this is too much, but I’m excited to see what you come up with.”

Anna mustered a small smile. “I can keep going once the power’s back. I’ll try my best.”

Geordi stood. “You let me know if you need anything. Don’t hide away; call for help if you need it, okay? Come down to engineering in the Jefferies tube if you need to, we’ve got power there.”

Anna nodded, and Geordi left through the still-open door. Her hands were still shaking and she felt queasy, but somehow his visit had made her feel safe enough to get by.

I’m not alone here, she thought. It’s not just me. This ship is full of good people trying to make everything okay. I’m not alone. Then, as if she needed to hear it too, she said the words out loud, “I am not alone.”



Stardate 47140.8 (Saturday 02/21/2370, 09:18) – Enterprise –
Bridge

Troi and La Forge sat beside each other at consoles, each trying to pick at various elements of the communication with Riker. As Data approached, Troi sighed and said, "I've gone over every word, every inflection, every facial response, and I still can't find any kind of code or hidden message."

"I agree the existence of such a message is remote, but I believe we should check," Data said.

"I'll keep trying," Troi replied, and started the video again.

Worf announced, "Two starships have been sent to intercept the mercenaries at Yadalla Prime and Draken Four, in case they attempt to attack those planets."

Data nodded at him. "Inform Starfleet Command that we will hold this position until further notice."

"So we are just going to remain here?" Worf asked, clearly frustrated.

Data flatly replied, "Yes, but we will continue to pursue all avenues of investigation."

Worf grumbled, "If we had not let them to escape, this would not be necessary."

"That is correct. But I believe Commander Riker wanted us to let them escape."

Worf seemed poised to object further, but La Forge spoke up before he had the chance and Data turned back to the consoles. "Commander, I think I've got something. I've been studying the com link Commander Riker used to transmit his command codes. I didn't see anything at first, but then I ran the transmission through a subharmonic analysis. I found this," he said, pointing to the screen. "It was sent by the same carrier wave as the command codes."

"It might be the message we've been looking for," Troi said hopefully.

"Possibly. I will attempt to re-sequence the signal. Begin running a search for a decryption key," Data said as he took Troi's place at the console and began working on the message with La Forge.



Stardate 47140.9 (Saturday 02/21/2370, 10:15) – Mercenary Bridge

As they dropped out of warp alongside an uninhabited planet, Narik glumly announced, “I’m taking the engines offline.”

“How long will it take to repair our battle damage?” Baran asked.

“It will take at least five hours to replace the antimatter containment unit.”

“You have three hours, Narik. One minute beyond that and you’ll answer for it with your life.” Baran turned to Riker. “I suppose I should thank you. None of us would be alive if it weren’t for you.”

Riker gave a little grin and said, “You’re welcome.”

“What’s wrong, Commander?” Picard asked from his console. He rose and approached, taunting, “You having second thoughts about betraying your comrades? Because that’s what you’ve done, betrayed them. Betrayed them in order to save yourself. You used to be just a second rate officer, now you’re a traitor and a coward. How does that feel?”

Riker feigned irritation and offense, then suddenly stood and punched Picard in the face.

Picard was expecting it and sprung backwards as soon as Riker’s fist made contact, allowing the blow to seem real but minimizing the actual impact. Still, the grunt he made as he landed on his back was legitimate. *Either I’m not as spry as I used to be or Will made that a little too authentic*, he thought as he regained his breath.

Riker crouched over him and shouted, “I don’t know. How did that feel?”

As though you might've been working out some other issues with the chain of command, my friend, Picard thought.

Baran barked at them, "That's enough. Galen, go down to the cargo hold and check out those artifacts."

Picard stood, adjusted his outfit as if it was his regular uniform, and served up as severe a glare as he could muster at Riker.

"Move!" Baran shouted, so Picard made a show of slinking off of the bridge, as if he'd been humbled. He kept up a sullen glower all the way to the cargo hold, just in case he ran into anyone else, but he encountered no one along the way.

As he sat back down at the table to resume the artifact scans, he rubbed at his face where the blow had landed. He knew any bruising would serve the illusion well, but this entire farce was wearing thin. He longed for his own ship, his proper uniform, and for everything to be back the way it ought to be.



A short time later, Tallera entered the cargo hold and stood beside Picard, eyeing him closely.

"You can tell Baran that I'm working as fast as I can," Picard grumbled at her, but when she simply continued staring at him, he looked up at her and growled, "What?"

"I'm trying to decide if you're incredibly stupid or incredibly smart," Tallera replied. "Why didn't you continue to fire on the Enterprise when their shields dropped?"

"You were there. The disruptors lost power," he said dismissively. "Computer, reset for diagnostic of new sample. Begin scan."

But it was clear Tallera was unconvinced. "I've watched you handle the weapon systems before. You know exactly how to bypass a problem like that," she said, walking around the table. "And why do you continue to argue with Riker? It should be

obvious that by alienating Riker you also alienate Baran, and yet you continue to do so. Why?"

The computer reported, "Scan complete. Terikon profile negative."

Picard shifted the artifacts around for the next test. "Computer, reset diagnostic for new sample and begin scan." He glared upwards at Tallera, who had moved to stand over him. "Look this isn't a Romulan labour camp. I don't have to answer your questions. And I don't give a damn what you think."

Tallera was clearly not pleased, but before she could reply the computer said, "Scan complete. Terikon profile positive. Ninety-eight percent probability of match."

Both of their expressions changed; their chest-thumping word-battle ceased with this new development. Picard reached into the ring of diagnostic tools and lifted out the positive artifact with much more care than he'd originally placed it. "Well, whatever it is we're looking for, it seems we've found it."

Tallera activated a combadge on her sleeve. "Tallera to Captain."

"*Yes, what is it?*" came Baran's reply over the com.

"I'm in the cargo hold. Galen's made a positive Terikon match on one of the artifacts."

"Good. Bring it to me immediately. Don't let anyone get near it," Baran ordered.

"Understood. Tallera out," she replied.

For a moment Tallera continued to stare at the object, but then reached for it reverentially and Picard knew this was no longer the time for challenges or questions. He handed it to her, watching silently as she traced her fingers over the carved figures on the object's surface. At the same time, he tried to commit the glyphs and pictograms to memory; he thought he saw the Vulcan gods of War and Death, but assumed he must be mistaken and they were Romulan versions he was previously unaware of.

Before he could contemplate the question further, Tallera regained her composure and strode out of the room with the

artifact, barking, “Keep working. There’s still more to find!” as she left.

Picard sighed tiredly, wondering if this meant this whole unpleasantness was nearly over, or if it’d only really just begun.



In Baran’s quarters, Riker sat semi-reclined on an uncomfortable divan, attempting to look much more casual than he really felt. Tallera’s news had put a wide grin on Baran’s face, and the latter had begun pouring a celebratory drink.

“That sounds like good news,” Riker said.

“Very,” Baran replied, holding up a glass in offer. Riker politely waved his decline. Baran shrugged and continued, “It means we’ve completed half of what promises to be a very profitable mission. And even better than that, I’m almost ready to get rid of your friend Galen.”

“Really?” Riker asked, hoping to sound eager without actually nudging Baran towards such an act.

“There’s one more artifact to find. Once Galen confirms that it’s genuine, his usefulness on this ship will come to a very sudden end,” Baran said, lifting his glass in salute to this plan and taking the seat opposite Riker.

Riker put on his best fake grin. “I can’t say I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Galen might be a loud mouthed fool, but sometimes he’s quite perceptive. His observations about you, for instance.”

“Oh?” Riker asked, sitting up and preparing for a fight, thinking Baran meant he was buying into Picard’s feigned accusations.

But Baran explained, “After what you did on Calder Two, I doubt if you have much of a future in Starfleet.”

Riker's grin returned and he relaxed. *Baran thinks he's the clever one here, and he has no idea how much we're playing him,* he thought. "Yes, I must say I've come to the same conclusion."

"Well, assuming that you were not my prisoner, what would you do now?"

"I guess I'd start looking for a new career."

"Ah," Baran countered lightly.

"There must be a place where someone with fifteen years of Starfleet technical knowledge would be useful. You wouldn't happen to know a place like that?"

"Well, possibly," Baran said with a little chuckle. "However, there's one thing that I have learned on this ship, and that's to be cautious and never to blindly embrace what might appear to be good fortune. And right now, you're a rather large stroke of good luck."

Riker let his cheeky grin slide. "I haven't exactly sworn my undying allegiance to you either, Baran. For instance, I'd like to know a little bit more about the job."

"Such as?"

Riker knew he had to be very careful. *Baran wants me and he's searching for an excuse to try me out some more. If he thinks I'm fishing for information, he's going to keep me on a very short line. I need to make it look like my core flaw is avarice, not curiosity. Mercenaries respect greed but are lethally suspicious of nosiness.* "Such as what you meant by a very profitable mission."

"Well, it's enough to know right now that your share will ensure a very wealthy and long life far from the Federation."

Riker put his grin back on despite the relatively useless answer. "Sounds promising."

"It is, only you're going to have to earn it. And you can start by putting aside your dislike for Galen and becoming his friend."

Genuinely confused, Riker dropped the grin again and asked, "Why?"

"Galen has allies on this ship. They could cause trouble if I decide to kill him. I want you to find out from him who they are."

Riker had never had to work so hard to suppress laughter in his life. *Allies on this ship? Call me Number One on that score. And now he's ordering me to go talk to the one person I thought I'd have to sneak around to talk to!* But he put on a scowl and said simply, "Okay."

As Riker stood to leave, Baran said, "One more thing, Riker. When the time comes, I want you to kill Galen."

Riker chuckled, letting the laughter leak out at least that much. *Sure thing, put a weapon in my hand, Baran*, he thought as he walked out, marvelling at how someone so smugly obtuse could manage to run this crew without getting himself overthrown already.



Stardate 47141.1 (Saturday 02/21/2370, 12:01) – Enterprise –
Bridge

Worf and La Forge stood beside Data who was still seated at a science console, pointing to the screen.

"I have completed my analysis of the signal from the mercenary ship," Data said. "I believe these groupings represent bearings and coordinates taken from their navigational system."

"So you think this is their flight plan?" La Forge asked.

"Yes. If I am correct, the mercenary ship is heading toward these coordinates in the Hyralan system."

Worf crossed his arms. "Well, their maximum speed is warp eight-point-seven. It will take them at least fourteen hours to reach that position."

La Forge proudly declared, "We could be there in ten."

"Make it so," Data said.

"Finally," Worf grumbled, walking back to his usual bridge position and ordering, "Set course for the Hyralan system and engage at warp nine."

Data glanced over his shoulder at Worf as La Forge winced a little. The two then looked at each other knowingly. Data rose as the ensign at the helm acknowledged Worf's order.

"Lieutenant, may I see you in the ready room?" Data asked.

Worf said, "Of course," and followed Data.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Data whipped around. "Lieutenant, I am dissatisfied with your performance as First Officer."

Worf scowled a little, clearly surprised at the statement. "May I ask in what way?"

"You continually question my orders in front of the crew. I do not believe this is appropriate behaviour."

"With all due respect, sir," Worf said in an irritated tone, "I have always felt free to voice my opinions even when they differ from those of Captain Picard or Commander Riker."

"That is true. But in those situations, you were acting as Head of Security, not as First Officer. The primary role of the second in command is to carry out the decisions of the captain; in this case, me."

Still scowling, Worf countered, "But is it not my duty to offer you alternatives?"

"Yes. But once I have made a decision, it is your job to carry it out regardless of how you may personally feel. Any further objections should be given to me in private, not in front of the crew. I do not recall Commander Riker ever publicly showing irritation with his Captain as you did a moment ago."

Worf's expression changed as he realized the gravity of his dishonourable behaviour. "No, sir," he admitted.

"If you do not feel capable of carrying out this role, I will assign it to Commander La Forge and return you to tactical. I would not enter it into your record as a reprimand, simply as a transfer."

Worf's shoulders slumped ever so slightly in deference. "I would prefer to remain at my current post."

But Data's posture and expression remained as firm as they'd been from the start. "Then I expect you to conform to the guidelines I have laid out."

"Aye, sir," Worf said obediently.

"Dismissed," Data directed, but then added, "Mister Worf, I am sorry if I have ended our friendship."

Sheepishly, Worf replied, "Sir, it is I who has jeopardized our friendship, not you. If you will overlook this incident, I would like to continue to consider you my friend."

"I would like that as well," Data replied in the same cold tone he'd used throughout.

"Thank you, sir," Worf said as he left.

Data tugged on his uniform to smooth it out, confident that he had handled the situation in the same manner as Picard would have. He was gaining new appreciation for the intricacies of personnel management while in command, and just as he had been on the Sutherland two years earlier, he was certain he was up to the task.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Stardate 47141.1 (Saturday 02/21/2370, 12:10) – Mercenary Vessel
– Picard/Galen’s Quarters

Picard sat at the small table with a frustratingly old and worn out PADD researching the glyphs he’d seen on the artifact before Tallera had taken it. It had never occurred to him before that anyone would use outdated basic technology instead of replacing it; then again maybe there was a point to not handing out anything new amongst a crew prone to mutiny. Older, less secure, mediocre devices offered fewer opportunities for mischief, he supposed.

As he was contemplating this while firmly pushing the overworked screen’s controls to try to get the information he needed, his door opened. He grabbed the small disruptor from the table and pointed it at the door. When he saw Riker standing there, he let out a breath of relief and lowered the weapon.

“Good to see you too,” Riker said. “Where’d you get that? I wouldn’t have thought Baran would let the likes of you be armed.”

“I cobbled it together from parts in the cargo bay. I’m honestly not even sure if it’ll work but I’ve had some unpleasant surprises so I decided something was better than nothing even if it’s barely enough to dissuade a would-be attacker,” Picard explained. “Will, this isn’t a good idea for you to be here. Baran might grow suspicious.”

Riker sat opposite him. “As a matter of fact, it was Baran who sent me here. He told me to pretend to be friendly with you and help you organize a mutiny, so he can determine who your supporters in the crew and then eliminate them.”

“What a tangled web we weave,” Picard said with the barest of smiles. “I have difficulty remembering whose side I’m on. So, what have you been able to find out?”

“When we reach the Hyralan system, we’re supposed to rendezvous with a Klingon transport ship. I’m not sure, but I think they may be delivering another of the Romulan artifacts to us.”

“A second artifact? Oh, by the way, that first artifact is not Romulan. It’s Vulcan.”

“Vulcan?” Riker asked, surprised.

“Mmhm. I have been researching the glyphs and pictograms from the Calder Two artifact, and although I don’t have enough data to translate all the inscriptions, the alphabet and symbology is much more consistent with early Vulcan than Romulan.” He passed Riker the PADD.

Riker glanced at it and asked, “Do these artifacts have some religious or cultural significance? Something that would make them valuable enough to kill for?”

“I don’t know,” Picard said, rising from his chair with frustration. “If I could only get access to the Enterprise computer just for a few moments.” He sighed and sat back down. “So, what will Baran do once he’s obtained the second artifact?”

“You’re supposed to verify its authenticity, and then I’m supposed to kill you. Then I take your place,” Riker said with a cheeky grin.

Picard responded with feigned boredom. “Will, you always seem to be after my job.”

Riker chuckled.

Picard continued, “Well, as soon as Baran feels that I’ve outlived my usefulness, he can kill me simply by using the neural servo. So, I think we had better start planning a mutiny.”

Riker nodded, and they discussed their next steps.



Data had not wanted to go back out to the main bridge immediately after his discussion with Worf and make it readily apparent that he had pulled an officer aside for a scolding, but neither did he wish to sit at the desk that he considered to still be shared territory of Commander Riker and Captain Picard. He wondered if it was difficult for the commander to sit there, and calculated a high probability that it was. Although he himself was immune to human emotional sentimentality, the more time he spent with these particular humans, the more he was able to predict their patterns in this regard. Over time he had begun to notice changes in his own behaviour and thought patterns that lent themselves to appreciation of the emotional value of objects, even if he did not directly experience the emotions themselves. He had acquired gifts and mementos through his interactions with others, and these objects held meaning in a way that could not be replicated if the original objects were lost.

Thus, there he stood, staring at the desk and chair, experiencing his own form of sentimental regard for this otherwise nondescript furniture, contemplating his aversion to using it himself while in temporary command. He also took the time to reorganize his internal files on the recent events, searching for any other possible linkages or clues he may have missed before.

The door chimed and he said, “Enter.”

La Forge came in, tapping his right knuckles against his left palm in a gesture Data knew to mean something was on his friend’s mind. “Hey Data,” Geordi said. “Everything okay?”

For a moment Data’s brow furrowed in confusion, but then he realized Geordi was referring to the altercation with Worf. “Yes,” he assured him. “All is now well. Thank you for your concern.”

“Yeah. This, all of this –“ he said, gesticulating openly, “it’s all confusing. The whole ship’s dynamic has been thrown off.”

“Indeed.” Data’s hospitality protocol kicked in. “Do you wish to sit down?”

“Hm? Oh, no,” Geordi said, tapping his knuckles on his palm again. “I kind of need to tell you something and I need you to understand why I did it and try not to get angry at me for it.”

“I am incapable of anger.”

“Yeah, I know. I mean I need you to not get...I don’t know, anything bad about it.”

“Perhaps you should tell me what is on your mind and trust that my reaction will be both professional and mindful of our long-standing friendship.”

“Right. Okay. I know you ordered me not to pursue the long range sensor thing and I didn’t, because I do see your point about not wasting time on trying to find a needle in a haystack. But I’ve had Anna working on it instead.”

“I see.”

“I didn’t mean to go behind your back. I just went to see her before we returned to Barradas and she...” Geordi sighed. “Data she wasn’t okay. She was pretending like she was, but she wasn’t, and I didn’t have time to find out why. I don’t know if it’s whatever happened at the party or because of the captain’s death or what, but she looked so...lost. So I told her about my theory and asked if she wanted to take a crack at it. She said sensors weren’t her main area of expertise but she was clearly intrigued by a ship that can’t be found, so she’s been working on it.”

“Has she had any positive results?”

“She’s got some interesting theories but I’m not sure any of them will help us find the commander. Because you were right, it is a needle in a haystack, and I don’t think she’s going to find it, but she might find something else instead. Anyway, it’s been bugging me, feeling like it might appear that I went behind your back, so if you think I did, I’m sorry. I’m just...I’m grasping at straws because I’m desperate.”

“As you said, it is a highly unusual time for all of us. I am acutely aware that we have gone from catering frequently to our

guest to suddenly neglecting her entirely. I have been concerned about that, but too busy with my other duties to find time to assure her. It seems to me that you found the time and combined it with a potential – if unlikely – solution. As Captain Picard told me himself, Starfleet does not want officers who mindlessly obey; it wants a community of creative thinkers. Even if I had the capacity to be angry at you, I would not be. I appreciate that you have informed me of this despite exhibiting notable stress over the situation. That tells me I can always trust you as both a colleague and a friend. Thank you.”

Geordi smiled and rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. “You know, Data, I didn’t realize how much I needed to hear that from you right now. Thanks.”

“Being thrust into command of the ship has made for some awkward social situations. I do not wish for it to ever be an issue between us as friends.”

“Me neither. And for what it’s worth, Data, and even though I want the Commander back and for this dynamic to go back to normal, you’re really good at this.”

“Thank you.”

“I don’t just mean that to be complimentary. I know we’ve talked before about how it seems like Starfleet isn’t sure if it’s ready to have an android heading a ship full time, but every time you do it, you show them how wrong they are to be worried.”

“Your confidence in and approval of me means a great deal.”

“Yeah, well, likewise.” Geordi turned towards the door, but then paused and turned back. “And hey Data? If you ever do get your own permanent command, let me be first to throw my hat in the ring for the job of your Chief Engineer.”

“You would always be my first choice.”

Geordi grinned. “Thanks. Now let’s go find the commander so we can relax again, right?”

“Indeed. Geordi?”

“Yeah?”

“I would appreciate it if you would continue to keep in touch with Anna, and please assure her that I will make time to see her again soon myself as soon as I am able.”

Geordi nodded. “Will do.”



Stardate 47141.2 (Saturday 02/21/2370, 12:45) – Mercenary Vessel
– Cargo Hold

Picard returned to the cargo hold and found Narik in there working on a computer interface panel. He put on a glare, but Narik ignored him. In truth, he was glad to have stumbled upon Narik first because he saw no better place to plant the seeds of mutiny than the beleaguered, squirrely engineer. Narik was clever and wary; Picard knew he had to find just the right balance of temptation without setting off alarm bells that would send Narik running to Baran. He could neither appear friendly all of a sudden, nor threatening. He decided blunt frankness was the way to go.

He sauntered up to Narik with a confident but not overly aggressive posture, stopping behind him to throw him off guard but then bowing his head low and not looking directly at him, mixing the signals so that Narik wouldn't know what was going on. In a low growl Picard said, “We need a new captain and I've come to one inescapable conclusion –“

“I agree,” Narik said, cutting him off. “But I don't think that's you.”

Well that part was easier than I expected, Picard thought. Of course he wouldn't want me. Let's see if I can get him to name who he would be willing to follow. He merely asked, “Oh?” as a prompt for more.

“I don’t trust you, Galen,” Narik said as he closed the access panel. “I don’t think the rest of the crew does either. They’re not going to follow you.”

Picard scoffed. “Then who will they follow? You?”

“No, but they will follow Tallera and so will I.” Narik scuttled out of the cargo bay, but before Picard could celebrate this easily attained information and clear enthusiasm for getting rid of Baran, Tallera swooped into the room.

She looked Picard up and down with a stony glare and demanded, “Who are you?”

Picard’s blood ran cold; she knew something. He used his genuine shock to feign confused and retorted, “What?!”

“You’re no smuggler and I don’t think your name’s Galen.” Tallera drew her weapon and pointed it at him. “You will tell me who you really are and what you are doing on this ship or I will kill you right here.”

“What are you talking about?” Picard asked, hoping she was merely fishing but sensing she had some sort of evidence against him.

“I will not play games with you. I found the message you sent to the Enterprise. When Riker was using his command codes to drop their shields, you sent them a transmission on the same carrier wave. You’re a Starfleet officer.” He rolled his eyes as if it was a silly accusation, but she didn’t buy it. “Do not deny it. It is the only logical conclusion.” Then, to his surprise, she re-holstered her disruptor and confessed, “My name is actually T’Paal, and I am a member of the V’Shar.”

It was all Picard could do to keep his jaw from dropping. “Vulcan Security?”

“That is correct. I infiltrated this ship a year ago posing as a Romulan mercenary. I’m here to investigate a possible threat to Vulcan.”

“What sort of threat?” he asked, as much for the real answer as to keep her talking while he tried to sort out the implications of this revelation – if it was even true – in his own mind.

But once more Tallera was not going to readily hand over control of the conversation. “First things first, Galen. Who are you?”

His stomach clenched; did he tell her and gain another ally on board, or was this all a ruse that would end up with he and Will dead? *She’s not going to believe me if I stick to my Galen story, so perhaps I ought to try the truth; if it backfires, I can claim I meant it as a ridiculous, obviously-exaggerated lie. As long as they don’t look up any official Starfleet photos, that is.* He pressed his lips together for a moment, braced for a fight, and then flatly replied, “I’m Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Enterprise.”

She blinked at him, but he couldn’t tell if she’d heard of him or was merely accepting of any Starfleet-sounding name and title. “Very well,” she said, her tone noticeably softened. “To answer your question, for several years now there has been a small but growing movement of extreme isolationists on Vulcan; a group that believes contact with alien races has polluted our culture and is destroying Vulcan purity. This group advocates the total isolation of Vulcan from the rest of the galaxy and the eradication of all alien influences from our planet.”

“That sounds like...an illogical philosophy.” In fact, it sounded far-fetched to him. Was she also stating truths that sounded as if they could be written off as obvious lies?

“Agreed. But extremists often have a logic all their own.”

Picard decided to go all-in, get as much information as he could out of her, and then sort the likely truths out later. “Tell me, Tallera, what are these artifacts we’ve been collecting? I know that they are Vulcan in origin.”

“I am sure you are familiar with the ancient history of my people, before we found logic, before we found peace.”

“You were much as my people once were: savage, warlike.”

“There was even a time when we used our telepathic abilities as a weapon. A time when we learned to kill with a thought.”

Once more Picard had to contain his shock. “The Stone of Gol?!”

“You know of it?” she asked, looking genuinely surprised that a human would be familiar with the legend.

“I know the story from Vulcan mythology.”

“The Stone of Gol is real, but there is nothing supernatural or magical about it. It is a psionic resonator, a device which focuses and amplifies telepathic energy. It is one of the most devastating weapons ever conceived.”

Picard said, “But according to the legend, the Stone was destroyed by the gods when the Vulcan people found the way to peace.”

“The resonator was believed to have been destroyed during the Time of the Awakening. Only one piece is known to have survived and it was placed in a Vulcan museum under heavy guard. A year ago, that piece was stolen from the museum. Soon after, mercenary ships began raiding archaeological sites across the quadrant. We believe a member of the isolationist movement is attempting to reassemble the resonator.”

“A telepathic weapon,” Picard said softly, fully aware of the dangers posed by such a device.

“My orders are to find that assassin and stop him.”

Picard decided to believe Tallera – or T’Paal, it seemed – and to work with her to stop anyone from getting their hands on all of the pieces. “It would seem that Baran has to deliver these artifacts to the assassin in order to get paid. Therefore, you and I should continue our masquerade,” he suggested.

“Agreed. But Captain, I cannot allow the resonator to be assembled. If necessary, I will destroy this ship, its crew, all of us to prevent that from happening.”

Picard took a deep breath and nodded.



“We will reach the Hyralan system in three minutes sir. Advance scans show no sign of any ships nearby,” reported Ensign Giusti.

“There are no populated planets in the system,” Worf confirmed.

“That’s because none of the planets are better than Class L and nobody wants to invest the time and work in terraforming anything this close to the edge of Federation space with the Romulans on the doorstep,” La Forge added.

“Indeed,” Data said from the captain’s chair. “Ensign, as soon as we drop out of warp, perform all available scans while cruising at maximum impulse through the system. They have hidden behind planets as shields before and I do not intend for us to be caught unawares again.”

“Yes sir,” she replied. “I estimate a complete system scan will take ten minutes.”

“Thank you, Ensign.”

As they arrived, Giusti confirmed initial scans still showed no other ships, and shortly thereafter said, “Scan complete, sir. I am detecting no signs of ships, technology, life forms, or evidence of settlements on or around any of the planets in the system, sir.”

“Excellent,” Data said. “Assuming we are correct that this is the mercenaries’ next destination, it would appear that we have arrived ahead of them.”

“But with no settlements on any of these planets, why would they come here?” asked Troi. “Unless it is to meet with someone else.”

“Precisely, Counsellor. That is why I believe our best strategy is to now lie in wait, using their own methodology of hiding until they arrive.”

“I like stealing a page out of their playbook,” La Forge said, “but their ship is a lot smaller than ours. We can position ourselves behind one of the planets relative to their likely incoming course, but that’ll only buy us a few seconds against any reasonable scanners.”

“Yes, I am aware of that,” Data replied. “That is why it is fortunate that we happen to have a guest on board with expertise in shield modulation used to alter a ship’s sensor profile in order to amplify a distress call.”

La Forge furrowed his brow, but then grinned widely. “Because she used the Baltimore’s weird, patched-together shields to do that.”

“Precisely. Though instead of making ourselves appear bigger and louder to attract attention, I hope to make ourselves seem smaller.”

“Right, because we can go quiet simply by setting the shield harmonics to mask our power signatures and noise profiles,” La Forge suggested. “But I have no idea how to mask our physical size.”

“I believe Specialist White can advise us on that,” Data replied, lifting his hand to tap his combadge.

But Troi interjected, “No, wait!” Data paused, hand in mid-air and looking at her expectantly, so she said, “If you contact White from the bridge where she thinks there may be command crew about, you’re going to cause her undue stress.”

Data considered this for a moment, then nodded again. “Perhaps we should speak to her from the ready room,” looking at La Forge.

“Yeah,” La Forge replied, and they went to the smaller room together.

Data resumed tapping his combadge and said, “Data to Engineering Lab 31-5435.”

There was no reply for a moment, prompting the two to exchange concerned glances.

Then Anna's voice came through the comm mid-word with, "*-rking? Hello, I'm not sure if I did that right and I had other equipment in the way, sorry. Hello?*"

"Yes, I can hear you. I require information pertaining to non-standard shield modulation techniques," Data said.

"*Oh. Okay. Um, that's good because I don't have this scanner thing fully working yet. I mean I have it doing things but I don't think useful things for what you need. Wait, shield modulation? Why?*"

"You repurposed the Baltimore's shield modulators to emulate a larger ship both to extend the fused profile of the shuttle to the Aerie class and to amplify your distress signal, correct?"

"*Uh...yes. I did that.*"

"I require advice on how to do the opposite, to make the Enterprise seem smaller to external scans."

"*Why, that's easy! You just feed the modulators the specs for the wrong ship. Pretend to be something you're not, like puffing out your chest and thumping it to seem like the biggest, loudest, toughest thing in the middle of the room, or the quietest, smallest thing in the corner.*"

La Forge interjected, "We know how to be quiet, but the modulators aren't going to accept a definition smaller than the shields can actually go, which is restricted by our hull size."

"*Oh hi, Geordi. Um, do you need the shields to actually be functional at the time?*"

"That would be ideal, yes," Data replied.

"*Oh dear. Because you could set them smaller within the ship but that's not, you know, actually protective. And would probably mess with internals. Yeah, don't do that. Umm, hmm...where are we?*"

"The Hyralan system."

"*Good, planets. Got anything with rings?*"

"Hyralan six and seven each have rings," Data replied.

"*Which rings are thickest with the most chunky stuff in them?*"

La Forge tapped the wall screen a few times and replied, “Hyralan Seven.”

“Okay so pick a spot where you can park the Enterprise underneath the rings relative to wherever you’re hiding from and then reprogram the shield modulators as tight as you can to the hull but make it lumpy by stealing another profile.”

“Lumpy?” La Forge asked.

“Yeah, like a freighter or something. If you’re a mouse you don’t want to look like a mouse to the cat, right? You want to look like a rock. Galaxy class is pretty and smooth. Freighters are boxy and lumpy. Be a freighter up against the rings and you’ll look more like a rock amongst the rocks.”

“But then we have the opposite issue,” La Forge said. “The biggest freighter specs aren’t even close to the size of the Enterprise.”

“You’ll have to lie to the modulators. Tell them they’re now on board a freighter class and then scale up the freighter’s size to fit around the Enterprise.”

Data and La Forge looked at each other, brows arched. “An intriguing concept,” Data said.

Anna added, *“I mean that’s probably breaking a bunch of protocols, but if I followed protocols I’d still be on Covaris Two. You Starfleet types never seem to want to lie to your machines but you definitely can. Modulators don’t know that it’d be ridiculous to build a freighter that big. Machines don’t know any truth except what’s defined as truth to them. That is..oh, not that..Data, I didn’t mean it’s okay to lie to you. You’re a person, not a machine. I mean you’re both but not just an input-output device like a modulator. Sorry!”*

La Forge silently mouthed to Data, “She’s worried,” and mimed an exaggerated cringe.

Data nodded but said to Anna over the comm, “Do not be concerned. I understood your meaning. Even if I was capable of taking offense, I would not do so. I fully agree with your assessment of the relative gullibility of the shield modulators. We

will attempt to utilize this methodology. Thank you for your advice. It has been very valuable.”

“Okay, you’re welcome. Sorry.”

Data’s brow furrowed. “There is no need to apologize. Data out,” and he tapped his badge off. The two returned to the bridge where Data ordered, “Ensign Giusti, bring us about to Hyralan Seven, positioned under the rings on the dark side of the planet as much as possible relative to the likely incoming vectors of the mercenary vessel. Mr. La Forge, please lie to the shield modulators.”

La Forge laughed and bounded back to the engineering console, “You got it.”

Troi said, “That appears to have gone well,” as Data sat back down in the captain’s chair.

“Yes, Counsellor. Though I am concerned that she believes she has inadvertently offended me. I will have to consider how to ameliorate that later.”

Troi leaned closer and quietly replied, “People who’ve been through the sorts of things she’s been through have a tendency towards anxiety over causing offense and being disliked for it. The best fix for that is to repeatedly assure them that no harm has been done and otherwise continue to be friendly as usual.”

Data nodded. “I have observed that trait already. I will heed your advice very closely. Thank you.”

Troi smiled and patted his arm.

“I’m having to override a lot of protocols with the modulators,” La Forge grumbled from his console at the aft of the bridge. “They don’t want to be lied to. But...aha! There we go.” He tapped several more times and announced, “Commander, our shields now believe we are a boxy, lumpy, Antares-class freighter, seven-point-nine-five times bigger than any Antares ever built.”

“Sir, I believe I can nestle our new imaginary profile up against a series of similarly-sized debris in the ring field that should trick incoming long-range sensors,” Ensign Giusti added.

“Excellent. Make it so, Ensign.”

“Yes sir.”

Data sat back down in the captain’s chair and declared, “This time, we will be the ones ready and waiting for them.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Stardate 47142.8 (Sunday 02/22/2370, 03:00) – Enterprise –
Bridge

Standard shift rotation came and went. La Forge went to his quarters to get some sleep with the caveat that Data would wake him if needed, and Worf returned from his own brief rest. Giusti and Troi both requested to remain on the bridge into the next shift to await the mercenary vessel, and Data appreciated the offer to keep the bridge crew consistent as long as possible.

At first, the tension of expectation kept them all alert, but as the hours dragged on, everyone except for Data began to slump slightly in their seats. Data remained as stiffly upright as always, requesting occasional status updates to help keep them all focused.

Just after 0300 Giusti reported, “Sir, I’m picking up a small vessel bearing one-two-seven mark three-three-five.”

The rest of them snapped back to full attention and Data rose from the chair to approach the viewscreen. “Is it the mercenary ship?” he asked.

“No, sir. It’s a Klingon ship.”

“A Toron class shuttlecraft, one person.” Worf replied from the first officer’s console. “It is within tractor range already and does not appear to have detected us.”

“Confirmed, sir,” Giusti said. “They were running long-range scans as they dropped out of warp and have run a low-level local scan in the last few seconds, but no other actions that would suggest we’ve been seen.”

“It is unlikely a ship of that type would be in this system without a purpose,” Worf said with a low grumble. “We must assume they are here to make contact with the mercenaries and should take this opportunity to seize them first.”

“I agree that they are likely involved in this somehow, but we cannot simply grab a Klingon vessel without cause,” Data said. “For all we know they are hunting the mercenaries as much as we are. Though I dislike giving up our advantage, we are obligated to break cover and address them as per standard regulations. Open a channel.”

Giusti tapped her console and a particularly gruff-looking Klingon face appeared on the viewscreen. Data said, “This is Lieutenant Commander Data of the Federation Starship Enterprise.”

The Klingon replied merely, “Koral.”

Data waited for more and when nothing else was said, he glanced over his shoulder to Troi, who gave him a bemused shrug. He turned back to the screen and asked, “I take it that is your name?”

The Klingon didn’t answer.

“May I inquire as to your destination?” Data asked politely.

“No,” the Klingon replied.

“May I ask the purpose of your journey?”

“No.”

In a slightly more officious tone, Data said, “Perhaps I have not made our intentions clear. We are investigating –“

Koral cut the transmission.

Data arched his brow in surprise for a moment, then returned to the captain’s chair. “He seems most uncooperative.”

“He may have been curt, but he was also very worried and even a little scared,” Troi said.

In a noticeably calm and deferential manner, Worf suggested, “Sir, may I recommend that we bring the shuttle aboard with our tractor beam, search it, and interrogate Koral.”

“According to the terms of the Klingon-Federation treaty, Koral has every right to free transit through Federation space. We cannot board or search his vessel without cause,” Data replied.

“Yes, sir,” Worf conceded. But then an idea struck him. “However, the treaty does give us the right to conduct health and safety inspections of any ship in our space.”

“Health and safety inspections?” Troi asked dubiously.

“I am not sure that using this clause as an excuse to conduct a search would be consistent with the spirit of the treaty,” Data said.

Worf started to argue the point, but instead once more conceded with a simple, “Yes, sir.”

“However, if Koral wishes to contest our actions,” Data said, “he can file a protest with the Judge Advocate General’s office. Bring the shuttle aboard. Then wake Doctor Crusher so you and she can begin the inspection.”

Worf barely suppressed a grin as he said, “Aye sir!” and hurried out of his seat and off the bridge.

Troi gave Data a look that was both amused and impressed with his unusual level of manipulation of regulations and personnel, but Data’s eyes remained fixed firmly forward, making her wonder if she was being handled in his growing skillset along with everyone else.



Doctor Crusher met Worf outside the shuttle bay a short time later. “What’s this about a health and safety inspection? At this time of night?” she asked.

Worf explained the situation to her as quickly as he could, then opened the door to the shuttle bay before she could issue any comment.

Koral’s small, battered-looking shuttlecraft was already inside, but the doors were still closed. Crusher gave Worf a dubious look but he muttered, “Do not worry. I will handle him.”

However, as the hatch opened and Koral came out the sheer size of him made even Worf stare in awe. He was a full head and

shoulders taller than Worf, with a withering glare aimed at the two Starfleet officers.

Crusher covered up her shock, concern, and fatigue by putting on her best friendly-professional voice to calmly explain, “Hello. I’m Doctor Crusher, and this is Lieutenant Worf. We’re here to conduct a health and safety inspection of your ship.”

“Health and safety inspection?” Koral scoffed.

Crusher smiled and spoke awkwardly, knowing full well that nobody in the room believed any of this was real. “That’s right. You know, radiation leaks, biochemical contamination, other health hazards,” she slowly listed as she moved to step around the enormous Klingon to board his ship. “Excuse me,” she added as he made just enough room for her to squeeze past.

She immediately began sweeping the shuttle’s systems with her tricorder. “Well, no radiation so far. I’m sure you’re glad to hear that?” she asked, looking back out at him as he towered over Worf. “Right,” she said nervously, and then continued her scan.



Stardate 47142.8 (Sunday 02/22/2370, 03:18) – Mercenary Vessel
– Bridge

Shortly before they arrived at Hyralan, Vekor reported, “There’s an incoming message. It’s from the Klingon shuttle. It was sent approximately fifteen minutes ago. He’s at the rendezvous coordinates but he’s been detained by the Enterprise. That’s all there is. He’s stopped transmitting.”

“Where are they in the system?” Baran demanded.

“Both ships are near Hyralan Seven,” Vekor replied.

“Keep the sensor baffler engaged and enter the system on the dark side of Hyralan Six,” Baran ordered. “That should keep their

eyes off of us long enough to plan our next move.” Then he scowled and muttered, “The Enterprise.”

Picard sneered at Riker. “Now how could they have found out about the rendezvous, Commander?”

“Quiet!” Baran barked. “All that matters now is that the Enterprise has the second artifact in their possession. We don’t have a choice. We’ll have to board the Enterprise and take the artifact.”

Picard had to hold back a laugh at how much he loved the idea of storming his own ship. *That’d end this nightmare quickly enough!* he thought. But he knew he couldn’t seem to eager to get on board, and that went doubly for Will. He turned his derisive expression to Baran instead and asked, “Do you have any idea how many security officers there are on board a ship like that?” *I don’t know the exact number myself but what I’d give to hear Data tell me the precise number delineated by species, gender, age, and current standing in the Parrises Squares tournament right about now.*

“No I don’t. But he does,” Baran said, nodding towards Riker.

The command training program at Starfleet is rigorous and feels thorough when you’re in it, Picard thought, but they never teach you how to get to know your first officer so well that – with a single glance – you can ensure you’re on exactly the same page about what needs to happen next, no words or other obvious signs required. That only comes with experience, and I can tell from the look in Will’s eye right now that we’re completely aligned. We can do this.

Riker confidently declared to Baran, “I could get us on the Enterprise. I can find the artifact.”

Well done, Will. Now to pre-empt Baran’s suspicions and give him enough rope to hang himself with, Picard thought. “Oh, yeah, very convenient! We beam you back aboard your old ship. We have to take a risk that you won’t change your mind and betray us!”

Riker returned the sneer and countered, “I have saved your life twice already, Galen. I would think you’d begin to show some gratitude by now!”

Picard squared up as if another fist fight was looming, forcing Baran to settle it out if he wanted to maintain control. He was delighted when Baran not only took the bait but gave him exactly what he longed for by saying, “Galen, if you’re so worried about Riker, then you can go on the raiding party and watch him.”

“Agreed,” Picard said with a snide little scoff, as if the triumph was over Will and not over Baran. He was glad Baran was too busy glowering at him to notice the glimmer of joy in Will’s eyes.

Baran said, “Get Tallera to issue you weapons and equipment for a raiding party of five.”

Picard turned and left the bridge.



Riker rose to follow Picard but Baran grabbed his arm and warned, “If you’re thinking of betraying us to your friends on the Enterprise, you might remember that I still have the ability to kill you at the first sign of trouble.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Riker replied.

“I have an additional task for you, one that will prove your loyalty. This raid is an opportunity to get rid of Galen. Once you’ve found that artifact, kill him.”

Riker said nothing, but allowed himself a smug little grin as he followed after Picard, knowing Baran would interpret it in precisely the wrong way.

Riker found Picard already in the transporter room with Tallera, Narik, and two of the other mercenaries he’d seen around looking vaguely threatening but never saying much. He didn’t know their names and didn’t care to.

Picard scoffed as he entered. “You may have Baran fooled but not me, Commander. How do you plan to get us past the Enterprise’s shields this time? Those command codes of yours won’t work a second time if that crew has half a brain amongst them.”

“Thankfully they’ve got just the one brain I need to access to help us out,” Riker said with a grin as he went to the console. “All I need to do is send the right series of E-band transmissions and not only will we get access to the ship, but most likely another defector out of Starfleet and into this much more lucrative industry.”

Tallera glared at him. “The last thing we need to do is attract more Starfleet attention.”

“Well we’ll attract plenty of attention if we splatter our buffer patterns on their shields trying to transport over there,” Riker snapped back before returning his concentration to the console and tapping the keys, hoping the signal was strong enough to be detected.



Stardate 47142.8 (Sunday 02/22/2370, 03:28) – Enterprise – Deck Two – La Forge’s Quarters

Geordi was deep asleep when his VISOR began to emit a loud alarm. He sat up straight in bed and reached for it, knowing immediately that it meant someone was trying to hack into its system. He’d set up the alarm against E-band intrusions after the Romulans had used that against him in the past, since he had no intentions of being turned into someone’s puppet like that again.

He hurried out of bed and crossed the room to his desk where he kept a basic diagnostic station for the VISOR. Clicking it into

place on the station, he said, “Computer, determine the source of the E-band transmission.”

“Transmission is coming from outside the Enterprise. Exact location cannot be determined without access to external sensors.”

“Okay then, what’s being transmitted?”

The computer made a few beeping sounds as it worked out what was happening, and then replied, “The E-band transmission contains a message in ancient Morse Code.”

“Translate and play message.”

The computer recited, “Know you’ve had enough Starfleet too. Drop shields at cargo bay holding Klingon ship. Got a new job for you. Will makes it worth your while. 6D6H6C3D3H. See you soon.”

“Klingon ship? What the hell? How long have I been asleep?”

The computer dutifully replied, “Approximately three hours and fourteen minutes.”

“That’s an eventful three hours! Computer, is my VISOR otherwise compromised?”

Another series of beeps and then it replied, “VISOR is functioning within normal parameters. E-band message is otherwise inert.”

He grabbed it, put it on, hurried back into uniform and ran up the short staircase between Deck Two and the external bridge corridor. When he got up there, he saw Troi and Data leading the biggest Klingon he’d ever seen into the Observation Lounge.

“Data!” he called. “I need to talk to you!”

“We are catering to our...guest at the moment,” Data replied.

“I really need to talk to you for a minute,” La Forge emphasized.

Data looked to Troi, who in turn looked up at the Klingon with a smile and said, “This way, if you please.” She shifted the smile into an anxious grimace at Data behind the Klingon’s back to indicate to him the he should deal with La Forge quickly.

Data immediately approached La Forge and asked, “What is wrong?”

La Forge whispered, “I just got an E-band Morse Code communication over my VISOR. I think it’s from Commander Riker.” He recited the message and added, “That last bit matches the full house he beat me with the last time we played poker.”

Data nodded. “Yes, I recall. I believe the unusual formation of ‘Will makes it worth your while’ is also meant to indicate who the message is from. Go ahead and drop the shields outside of shuttlebay two, but get a security team down there immediately. Doctor Crusher and Worf are there with the Klingon’s vessel.”

“Got it,” La Forge said as he hurried away and left Data to go into the Observation Lounge.



Tallera stood reading the transmission over Riker’s shoulder as he entered it. He let her see everything he was doing openly, including showing her the translated message as it was sent. “There,” he said. “My friend will know that’s from me. If he chooses not to comply, we’ll come at them with brute force. But I’m pretty sure he’ll do as I ask.”

“What was that bit at the end? What are you playing at, Riker?” Tallera demanded.

“Poker,” he replied with a grin. “I beat him with that hand and he owes me money over it.”

“Won’t that make him more likely to shoot you on sight?” Picard growled.

“Unlike you, Galen, people actually like me and want to follow my lead,” Riker retorted. He approached to draw a weapon out of the locker himself, holding it menacingly in the air in front of Picard’s face. “Some of us were born to lead, and others should shut up and learn their place.”

Picard made a show of partially charging at Riker, but left room for Narik to step between them. “Enough, both of you!” Narik said. “I wish Baran had put you both out the airlock on first sight.”

At the console, Tallera’s eyes widened. “Fascinating,” she said. “You continue to impress, Riker. I am detecting a gap in the Enterprise’s shields near one of their aft shuttle bay ports.”

“I knew my guy would come through for us,” Riker said. “Let’s go!”



Data took a seat opposite Troi in the Observation Lounge with Koral sitting stiffly at the end of the table. There was a large flask of wine on the table, with a tall glass in front of Koral.

Troi once again smiled diplomatically as she said, “I’m sure the health and safety inspection won’t last much longer. And in the meantime, I’m really glad that we have this opportunity to get to know you. May I ask what business you’re in?”

Koral merely glared in reply.

Data attempted to emulate Troi’s smile, but the result was an awkward, strained smirk. When it was clear Koral had no intention of answering Troi, Data lifted the flask and poured wine into the glass. “Lieutenant Worf has programmed our replicators to make a very good approximation of Klingon bloodwine,” he explained. “I believe you will find it to your liking.”

Koral regarded the glass with scorn as he picked it up. Then, instead of drinking the wine, he turned his hand to pour it onto the floor in a slow, steady, unnervingly loud stream until every drop was contemptuously spilled.

Data and Troi continued to smile indulgently at the Klingon, neither knowing what to say next.



In the shuttlebay, Crusher closed her tricorder and said, “Well, that’s my third scan and I still haven’t find anything out of the ordinary.”

Worf shook his head and scoffed. “He must be hiding something. We should download his computer memory and analyze it.”

“I’d have a hard time defending that as part of a safety inspection,” Crusher protested.

“We could claim that the computer was generating abnormal radiation signatures.”

“Worf, we’re on pretty shaky ground as it is. We can’t just –“

She was interrupted by a security crewman entering from behind her and several figures beaming in to her left. The lead of the party beaming in was Riker, and he immediately shot the incoming security guard. Then, as Worf reached for his own phaser, someone who appeared be none other than Captain Picard – albeit dressed in mercenary gear – shouted, “Don’t!” while also brandishing a weapon at them both.

Riker shouted, “Jam that door!” while pointing to where the security officer had just entered. One of the other mercenaries went directly to the door’s controls to attempt to lock it out.

“What is going on?” Worf demanded as Picard went into Koral’s shuttle with Narik close behind.

“Shut your mouth, Klingon,” grumbled Narik.

“I guess you’re surprised to see me, Doctor,” Riker said, standing in front of Crusher and Worf.

“You could say that,” she replied carefully, her eyes wide.

“I’ve had a change of profession,” Riker said with a little grin and a knowing twinkle in his eye.

“It’s not in here,” Picard said as he came back out of the shuttle. He pointed his weapon at Worf and asked, “Hey, you,” as if he’d never seen Worf before. “Where’s the artifact?”

“I do not know what you’re talking about,” Worf replied calmly.

“Use your brain,” Riker scolded at Picard. “They wouldn’t be searching the shuttle if they had the artifact. Koral must have it.” He turned back to Crusher and asked, “Where is that Klingon pilot?” He gave her a very specific look to indicate she should play along.

Crusher remained clearly unnerved as she replied, “In the Observation Lounge with Data and Troi.”

“How far?” Narik asked.

Riker replied, “Twelve decks away.”

Worf said, “Security will not allow you to get that far.”

“They won’t get the chance. We’ll use the transporter in that shuttle,” Riker said, indicating one of the Enterprise’s own shuttles behind him. “We’ll beam directly to the Observation Lounge. Sorry about this,” he added with a shrug as he quickly fired stunning blasts at Worf and then Crusher, sending them both flying back.

Picard paused, looking at them on the floor, but Riker shouted, “Let’s go!” and they all turned to run to the nearby shuttle.

Seconds later, La Forge and a security team bypassed the locked door and entered, phasers out and scanning the room for intruders. La Forge and two others hurried to the sides of Worf and Crusher on the ground just as the security officer Riker stunned was staggering to his feet. As Worf started to rouse, La Forge tapped his combadge and said, “Intruder alert in shuttlebay two! Medical emergency, we’ve got two down!”

“The room is clear!” shouted another security officer.

“I’m okay,” Crusher said blearily as she came around. “At least I think I am. I might be losing my mind.”

“Commander Riker stunned us!” Worf said indignantly as he struggled to his feet with the help of two other security officers.

Crusher sat up and said, “I could swear I just saw the captain.”

“What?” La Forge asked.

“We did,” Worf said. “I do not know what is going on, but Captain Picard is alive.”



Up in the Observation Lounge, Data was still futilely attempting to engage with Koral. “If you could tell us something about the nature of your mission – “ he began, but was interrupted by the raiding party beaming in.

Data, Koral, and Troi all rose in shock as the figures appeared before them. The sight of Riker was surprising enough, but Troi’s jaw dropped as she realized the party also included Captain Picard.

La Forge’s voice came over the main comm system saying, *“Intruder alert in shuttlebay two! Medical emergency, we’ve got two down!”*

“What is this?” demanded Koral.

“Quiet!” ordered Riker. He pointed his weapon at Data and said, “Don’t answer that call!”

Picard hurried past Troi to Koral and scanned him with a tricorder while pointing his weapon at the Klingon with his other hand.

“Does he have it?” Riker demanded.

The tricorder beeped. Picard put it away and reached into Koral’s coat, withdrawing a small, pointed stone with ancient writing on all sides. “This is it,” he declared, holding it up for the rest of the mercenaries to see.

“Are you sure, Galen?” Narik asked.

“Yes. I can recognize the inscription pattern from the first artifact.”

Realizing there was a game afoot, Data interjected, “Commander Riker, by taking this action you risk charges of assault, theft, piracy, and treason.”

“Really?” Riker asked glibly. “Then I guess adding one more charge wouldn’t hurt.” He shot at Picard but missed widely as

Picard threw himself to the ground, rolled over, and returned fire, striking Riker directly in the chest.

Troi gasped and ran to kneel by Riker's side, joined shortly by Data.

Picard got back on his feet and towered over them. "Is he dead?" he asked in a dark tone.

Troi looked up at him and knew in an instant what he needed her to say. "Yes," she replied.

"Good. Activate the transporter," Picard said as he moved to stand with the other mercenaries, and a moment later they were all beamed away.

Data rose and tapped his combadge. "Security and medical emergency teams to the Observation Lounge. Data to bridge. Re-establish all shields and begin sensor sweeps for the mercenary ship."

Ensign Giusti replied over the comm, "*Aye sir.*"

Data knelt back down beside Riker once more.

"He's all right. He's only stunned," Troi said as Riker's eyes fluttered and he began to sit up.

"I must admit, I am experiencing a similar sensation," Data said.

"This is going to take a little time to explain," Riker said groggily.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Stardate 47143.0 (Sunday 02/22/2370, 04:24) – Mercenary Vessel
– Bridge

“Set course three-one-zero mark two-one-five, warp six,” Baran ordered as the raiding party walked back onto the bridge. He turned to them and demanded, “Where is it?”

Picard tossed the stone to Baran, who caught it in both hands and examined it closely. Picard then approached closer and growled, “I have something else for you, Baran.” When Baran looked at him again, Picard punched him in the face, sending him flying backwards. “Tell him what happened, Narik,” Picard said.

“Riker turned on us,” Narik said, stepping up to stand beside Picard. “He tried to kill Galen before we beamed back.”

“He might have killed all of us!” Picard shouted. “And I believe he was acting under direct orders, Baran. You betrayed us.” He began slowly walking around the bridge, addressing the crew. “This has gone far enough. I think it is time that we had a new commander, someone who will lead us to those profits that we’ve been promised.”

“Oh, really?” Baran said, rising to his feet and dabbing at his swelling lip. “And who would that be, Galen? You?” He looked around at the others. “He’s plotted this all along, opposed me at every turn, endangered all of us by refusing to follow his orders.”

“To follow your orders,” Picard corrected him. “The orders of a small man trying to fill a role too big for him. I say it’s time for a change. Who’s with me?”

At first, nobody moved, but then Narik stepped up once more. Tallera quickly followed, coming down from the rear consoles with Vekor close behind. That prompted the rest of them to close ranks around Picard and stand glaring at Baran together.

“Hmph,” Baran muttered with an unimpressed little smile.

“It’s over, Baran,” Picard declared.

Baran drew the device linked to their neural servos and pointed it at Picard. “Not quite. As long as I have this, I’m still captain of this ship.”

“You can’t kill all of us,” Picard said with a chuckle. “You need us to run the ship more than we need you to command it.”

“I don’t have to kill you all. Just you, Galen.” Baran glared at Picard for a moment, then pressed the button down hard. At the same time, his other hand flew up to his neck. Baran choked, grunted, and fell to the floor, his eyes staring vacantly at the ceiling.

Tallera moved to stand over him, regarding him entirely dispassionately. “What happened?”

“I switched the transponder codes,” Picard replied. “Given his feelings about me, it seemed a sensible thing to do.”

Tallera nodded, then bent down to retrieve the artifact from Baran’s clutched fingers. “Baran was nothing.” She stood and went to Picard’s side. “We have a mission to complete and the crew needs a leader.”

Picard looked around, but nobody else was moving at all. He took out his weapon and fired it at the neural servo control device on the floor beside Baran’s hand. It was vaporized, leaving nothing but a scorch mark on the carpet.

“There’ll be no more punishment on this ship,” Picard said. “Now, do your duties and I’ll see to it that we complete our mission and get our payment.”

Tallera nodded towards Baran’s body and said, “Remove that.” Two of the other crew members stepped forward to take the body away.

“Orders?” Vekor asked.

“Maintain our present course and speed for now. I’m going to find out when and where we’re supposed to deliver our cargo,” Picard replied.

“Aye, captain.”

Picard half-smiled in triumph, then strode off the bridge knowing full well the motivation of payment was enough to keep everyone on task while he continued to discover what was really going on.



Stardate 47143.3 (Sunday 02/22/2370, 07:18) – Enterprise – Ready Room

Once Doctor Crusher had examined Riker, she'd sent him directly to his quarters to get some sleep. He'd obeyed, but then was up two and a half hours later to clean himself up and report for the first shift. As exhausted and eager to rest as he was, this situation wasn't resolved; the captain was still out there, still in danger, and Riker had no intention of letting him continue on his own.

However, he knew there was still risk in him taking back control of the bridge. On the chance there was communication with the mercenary vessel, he needed to stay out of sight to keep up the illusion of his death that Picard had crafted. The plan they'd quietly come up with before reaching Hyralan had gone even better than they'd hoped once Baran decided to send the two of them to the Enterprise together, and now he was back aboard where he could pass on Picard's warning to the Vulcan security forces.

Further, he was just too damned tired to cope with any routine Starfleet issues. Instead, he'd come onto the bridge at the start of shift, nodded to Data in the captain's chair, asked Worf to put in a request to speak to Vulcan security, and then gone straight to the ready room to sit half-asleep in the captain's other chair until he was needed.

He reflected on how painful it'd been to sit there before when he thought Picard was dead. He chuckled to himself at the

absurdity of it all, then leaned back in the chair, hands together across his chest, and laughed again as he let his eyes close. His mind immediately started wandering through the strange and confusing first steps of early sleep, so he forced himself to sit back up and shake it off. There was a PADD on the desk; he picked it up and tried to read it, though he had trouble concentrating. It was the official report of Koral having been put into the brig pending formal arrest at the next Starbase for dealing in stolen antiquities.

“A Klingon trying to sell a stolen Vulcan-Romulan artifact to unaffiliated mercenaries in Federation space with abducted Starfleet personnel and a Vulcan operative involved,” he muttered. “Glad I’m not the one who has to sort out that political headache.”

The comm system chimed. *”Worf to Commander Riker. Minister Satok of Vulcan Security is standing by on a secure channel.”*

“Put it through in here,” he replied, sitting up at attention.

Over the terminal on the desk, Satok said, *“Greetings, Commander. How may I be of service?”*

“Minister, I thought I should let you know that the mercenary ship which has been raiding planets in the Taugan sector is probably on its way to Vulcan right now and likely to arrive in less than forty-eight hours.”

“I do not understand.”

“I’m sorry. It’s been a difficult couple of days. I know that one of your operatives has been on a mercenary ship investigating the possible re-assembly of an ancient psionic resonator that we believe she intends to return to Vulcan. I didn’t want someone to make a mistake and start firing at them when they approach your planet.”

“Commander, I believe there is a problem. We have no operative aboard a mercenary ship.”

Riker’s gut clenched; things hadn’t gone to their plan at all, and now Picard was stuck on that untraceable vessel with no idea that Tallera had him trapped. Worse, Riker couldn’t do anything about it anymore except wait for them all to arrive at Vulcan – if that was

even truly where they were headed after all – nearly two days away.



Stardate 47143.4 (Sunday 02/22/2370, 08:11) – Mercenary Vessel
– Baran’s Quarters

Picard sat at Baran’s desk with Tallera standing beside him as he showed her what he’d uncovered in Baran’s terminal. “According to Baran’s logs, we are to deliver the two pieces to the T’Karath Sanctuary on Vulcan.”

“I know that place,” Tallera replied. “It was an underground stronghold for one of the factions during the last civil war. It’s been abandoned for centuries.”

Picard tapped the terminal’s comm button. “Galen to bridge. Does the last course Baran set take us to Vulcan?”

Vekor responded, “*Vulcan would be included in that trajectory, yes.*”

“Good. Maintain course,” Picard said.

“*Understood,*” came the reply.

He then tapped the comm back off and said more casually to Tallera, “Oh, I wonder if you can possibly help me with something.” He held up the two artifacts and explained, “I have been able to translate most of the writing on these two pieces. For the most part, they’re warnings of death and destruction to anyone who opposes the resonator.” He flipped the main piece over and continued, “But I am not able to determine what appears on the anterior side. For example, this symbol represents the Vulcan god of War and this is the god of Death, but if you look really carefully, you can see a third symbol missing,” he said, pointing to the V-shaped gap in the middle of the artifact. “Now that obviously

should belong to the final piece. What's odd about this is that the gods of Death and War would typically always stand alone on an artifact. They would never be combined with a third glyph."

"Fascinating," Tallera said, though Picard noticed she seemed unimpressed. "But I am not an archaeological expert."

Picard nodded, realizing either by lack of knowledge, interest, or desire to answer a human's questions, she wasn't going to satisfy his curiosity. "I'm really anxious to see the final artifact, because it might provide a valuable insight into Vulcan mythology."

"When we arrive at Vulcan, I will take these pieces to a secure holding area before going on to the Sanctuary," she said, putting out her hand for them and Picard handed them over. "I prefer to go alone. It will arouse less suspicion on the part of the isolationists."

"Well there should be no problem about our entering orbit. I asked Commander Riker to contact the Vulcan authorities from the Enterprise and let them know that we were likely approaching," Picard said reassuringly, leaning back in the chair.

But instead of being reassured, Tallera stiffened and asked, "Why did you do that?"

"Well, I didn't want to risk a misunderstanding," Picard replied, somewhat awkwardly. It hadn't occurred to him that the Vulcan government wouldn't want open assistance from Starfleet, but something about Tallera's change in attitude sounded his internal alarms. *Why wouldn't she want us to contact them?* he wondered. *That is, unless...* Picard sat up straight in the chair. "Someone might have mistaken this for an actual raid."

She casually admitted, "It was a wise precaution."

A little too casually now, he thought. *Something isn't right here. What's she playing at?* He stood and feigned his own nonchalant demeanour as he came closer to her and said, "Perhaps I should contact the Enterprise, have them meet us at Vulcan just in case these isolationists try to escape."

She turned a distinctly un-Vulcan-like indulgent little smile on him. “Your offer is appreciated but our security forces are more than adequate.”

She’s lying. She’s not who she claimed to be. Then who is she? he thought. “I see. Do you think it’s wise for you to go there alone?” he said, masking his sudden apprehension about this whole thing as bumbling concern for her safety. “After all, they were expecting Baran to show up. Don’t you think if I were to accompany you, it might seem more plausible?”

Once more she gave him a most un-Vulcan reaction of that cunning little smile. Vulcans were frequently dismissive of humans in ways that seemed cold or even rude in Earth culture, but they were not snide, mocking, or spiteful in their lofty disdain. Those were emotional reactions, as was the smile on her face as she said, “Captain, I do understand your human emotional need to be there at the final moment, but this is a Vulcan matter.” She even wrinkled her nose in a sneer at the end.

Either she actually is a Romulan after all, or she’s unlike any Vulcan I’ve ever met before, he thought. But he recognized she was finished with this banter and that he’d get no more information without letting on that he was suspicious. So he put on his own false smile and acquiesced. “Of course” he said, nodding and backing off.

She said, “Thank you,” and walked out of the room, the artifacts still in her hand.

Picard stood there pondering his next actions. He couldn’t call the Enterprise without someone finding out. If the crew knew who he was, they’d likely kill him immediately. If Tallera or T’Paal or whomever she was found out and his newfound suspicions were correct, she’d either kill him or expose him to the crew and let them do it for her. He decided his best course was to go on as if he suspected nothing, letting her think she’d won, but keep a close eye on her for the two days it would take to get to Vulcan.



Stardate 47144.6 (Sunday 02/22/2370, 18:35) – Enterprise

Usually long-distance trips on the Enterprise meant more free time for most personnel, but this day had been logistically, technically, and procedurally tough for nearly everyone. Word got around that Picard was still alive before it could be contained, though Riker did manage to keep the news about Tallera's apparent deception restricted to the senior officers only. Ship-wide edicts to keep the information about Picard confidential until he could be rescued were issued, along with communications blackouts just to be sure.

Riker also informed the other senior officers of every detail he could remember about the mercenary vessel, from armaments to shield configurations. He hadn't been able to glean the specifics of what made the ship untraceable to long-range sensors, though he had seen a console with something labelled as a "Miradorn Sensor Baffler" and heard Baran give orders pertaining to that term. After the debriefing, Crusher ordered him back to his quarters for rest, leaving La Forge and Data to research the matter further.

La Forge went to contact Anna to let her know this new information that might impact her experiments, but in doing so found a message from her that she'd gone to bed at 13:30 after having been up working on the project for over thirty hours straight. He sent a reply to let him know when she was awake again, and not to worry about continuing the project for now.

Data reported that the Miradorn were an unaffiliated race from the planet Mirada in the Miradorn system in the unclaimed region between Ferengi space and the Tzenkethi Coalition zone. They were known for producing high-end raiding ships for The Orion Syndicate, the Markalian smuggling operation, and other piratical groups. Starfleet had no technical data on the so-called Miradorn

Sensor Baffler other than it having the ability to use some sort of electromagnetic charge to escape detection. La Forge and Data agreed it was possible that Anna's research was on the right general track, but likely too far removed from the actual technology to be of assistance before they reached Vulcan.

Thus the day was spent preparing the ship for possible battle with the mercenary vessel, should they manage to locate and overtake it, or merely arrive in time to assist Vulcan's defensive forces in doing so. Several subspace meetings were held between the Enterprise, Starfleet headquarters, and Vulcan security officials. It was agreed that the best chance of getting Picard back alive was to make Vulcan appear no more defended than usual while otherwise having plenty of backup nearby if needed.

By evening, all planned preparatory work was well underway and the situation tense but stabilized as they hurtled through space towards Vulcan.

La Forge saw a message notification on his console in main engineering while Data was nearby working on yet more tweaks for the sensors in an attempt to give them every edge available. He read the message, stood, went to Data and said, "Anna's awake, in her lab, and says she's awaiting further instruction. I think we should go give her the update in person."

"Agreed," Data replied, and they went to the turbolift.

They found her sitting at her lab's table amidst a chaotic mess of pieces of equipment. Dominating the room, however, was a large cylindrical device roughly strapped to a heavy tripod, pointed at the opposite end of the room. On that opposite wall were a series of test panels covered with varying sizes of tubes and pumps.

"What the...what is this stuff?" Geordi asked, his mouth agape.

"Hm?" Anna asked, seemingly at home in the chaos. "Oh, sorry about the mess. I'll clean it up later. I've got my preliminary results for you here," she said, pushing a PADD across the table. "But I got your message that the commander has been retrieved so I guess it's all moot now anyway."

Geordi stepped over a discarded canister to take the PADD. He glanced at it and Data read over his shoulder. “Wait, you’ve actually developed a way to hide from long-range sensors using magnetorheological and ferrofluids?”

She shrugged. “It seems to have been used before to some extent so I didn’t come up with the idea. All I did was run different combos and percentages and such and then came up with a relative table for configuring long-range sensors to see it.”

Data turned his furrowed brow to the large device on the tripod. “Is that an EM flux sensor?”

“Sort of. It’s missing most of the parts but it gave me the information for the table, yes. I mean obviously I couldn’t build a full-scale sensor array in a room this size. Also because of not wanting to be fried from the power required for the full thing. This isn’t hooked up to an EPS conduit or anything, don’t worry. It’s just enough to test a mini EM pulse against the various fluids I ran through those panels I stuck to the wall over there.” She suddenly looked horrified. “You’re not angry that I attached that to the wall, are you?”

“Angry?” asked Geordi, still scrolling through the PADD. “Of course not! This is amazing, though kind of terrifying.”

“Hopefully not too terrifying,” she said nervously. “I was worried it might count as researching cloaking and break the Romulan treaty, so I was careful not to even look at any light-bending side to any of this at all. It’s just the fluids and the EM pulses, I promise.”

“Uh, no, this isn’t a treaty violation that I’m aware of,” Geordi replied. “But if this is accurate, you’ve found a way to hide from Starfleet’s best sensor arrays.”

She seemed to relax as she shrugged again. “Well yeah, but also how to calibrate the sensors to find it. Lock and key together, so it’s probably not particularly useful.”

“I am pretty sure there are some people who will find this more than useful!”

“So give it to them,” she said with an indifference to her result that baffled him. “I was only trying to be helpful for finding the ship that had the commander but, like I said, since he’s already back I’m just sorry I couldn’t come up with something more directly useful.”

Data peered over Geordi’s shoulder at the PADD and said, “These are intriguing results of their own accord, and we have not yet apprehended the mercenary vessel.”

“But Geordi’s message said they’re using some other electromagnetic pulse system.”

“Even so, this is a commendable project. You should not be upset if it is inapplicable to this particular case,” Data said.

“Oh, I’m not upset about that,” she said with a tired chuckle. “I had to go down a lot of research dead-ends before I finally got the Baltimore ready for launch, trust me. I’m not bothered by weird scientific detours.”

“But you do seem unhappy. Is it the red alerts?” Geordi asked.

“Or that you thought I was offended in our earlier conversation?” asked Data. “Because I assure you, I was not.”

Anna cringed a little at Data’s suggestion. “I was still a bit worried about that, yeah, but mostly the whole thing has just been...you know...hard. There are bad guys out there that killed your captain and kidnapped your first officer. That’s kind of scary.”

Data and Geordi looked at each other, and then Geordi said, “The captain isn’t dead. You didn’t hear?”

Anna sat up straighter and went pale. “He’s not dead?”

“No,” Data replied. “It was believed that he was, but it turns out he has also been on the mercenary vessel all of this time.”

Anna looked shocked, then angry. “So he’s a traitor now too?”

“What? No!” Geordi exclaimed. “They abducted him, same as the commander, and they still have him.”

“Then...he pretended to be dead? This is very confusing and disturbing,” she said with a quaver in her voice.

“The mercenaries have a phaser-based transporter device,” Data explained. “They shot the captain as reported by the witness, but

he was not killed. He was transported to their ship. We are hoping to catch up to the mercenary vessel on its way to Vulcan in order to rescue him.”

She blinked several times, looked around the room, and then slumped towards the table, putting her face in her palm. From behind her hand she asked, “So...is this a common problem for Starfleet? People disappear and are presumed dead?”

“No, no, of course not,” Geordi said quickly, but then he thought about it and added, “Well I mean there was that time we thought you were dead, Data.”

“You mean when I was abducted by Kivas Fajo.”

“Yeah. He tricked us into thinking you’d died in a shuttle explosion.”

Data nodded. “There was also the time we all believed both you and Ensign Ro had been killed.”

“Right,” Geordi said with a sigh. “But we were just out of phase with this dimension.”

“Technically I did die in 1893 but you were able to reactivate me,” Data said.

“1893? The year or is that a ship?!” Anna exclaimed.

“The year. It was...complicated,” Geordi said hesitantly.

“Time travel was involved,” Data explained.

Anna raised up her hands. “Jiminy Crickets, I don’t even want to contemplate time travel. Not ever,” she said with a visible shudder.

“And I guess in a way something of Commander Riker was believed to be dead once too because now we have Thomas Riker,” Geordi admitted.

“Who?” Anna asked.

“There was a transporter accident where –“ Data began.

But Anna cut him off by saying, “No wait, I don’t want to know. Transporters are scary enough without thinking about accidents, and I only use them because crashes are scarier. And speaking as someone who has crashed and was also presumed dead, is there a way to formally request that if I’m ever presumed

dead again, you not believe it unless you have my actual body and it's one hundred per cent, definitely, absolutely dead? Because it seems like this does happen a lot with Starfleet and I'm about to lose my mind right now at the apparent high probability of it happening again." She put her head in both hands, elbows on the table, clearly very distraught.

Data and Geordi exchanged another worried look. Data moved a chunk of partially disassembled equipment off of one of the other chairs and sat down beside her. "Anna, I personally assure you that I will never allow you to be abandoned like that again." She looked up at him, eyes rimmed with tears, so he added, "You need never fear a repetition of what happened to you on Covaris Two."

"Yeah," Geordi said gently. "We're not going to let anything happen to you. I know it sounds bad when we list stuff out like that, and we do lead somewhat dangerous lives I guess, but we don't make a habit of giving up on people. The important thing in all of those stories is everybody was okay in the end. If something happens and you need help, find a way to get a signal out because I promise we'll be looking."

"The Baltimore never stopped its distress beacon," she said, wiping her eyes on the backs of her hands. "It was just ignored."

"Only because of the unique circumstances where it was determined that it was too unsafe to retrieve the ship," Data said. "Since your return, Starfleet protocol has been updated to require a much higher level of confirmation of lack of life signs. It is my intention to ensure you are never exposed to that sort of danger ever again, but even if some sort of terrible incident were to occur along with a reasonable assumption of death, I give you my solemn word that I will always come find you."

She stared at him, as if trying to see if he meant it or not. Then she whispered, "That's the best thing anyone's ever said to me."

"I mean it in all sincerity. As long as I live, you will never be marooned or left behind ever again."

She nodded slightly. "I believe you. I don't know why," she said, her face contorting in anguish. "I have no reason to ever

believe that from anyone but somehow...something about you makes me believe it.” She turned to Geordi and added, “I believe both of you.”

“Yeah,” Geordi replied gently. “Look, it’s been a rough few days on everyone, and a few hours of sleep isn’t enough after you’ve been doing all of this,” he said, waving his hand at the equipment. “If you want to continue this another day, that’s great, and if not, that’s fine too. I’m happy to help you pack it away and pass it on to Starfleet research, or whatever you want to do. But for now, I know I’m exhausted and I’ve slept more than you have. There’s only one person in this room who doesn’t need sleep but even he needs to go feed his damn cat,” he said with a little laugh.

Anna wiped more tears away and nodded. “I could use a proper break. I’m...I guess I’m kind of messed up right now. I thought I’d figured some stuff out but apparently not. This is all...just...yeah.” She put on her leg and stood. Data rose with her. They walked out of the lab together and to the door of her quarters, where she thanked them again and then went in alone.

Geordi sighed as Data tapped the panel beside the turbolift. As they got in, Geordi said, “That’s not how I expected any of that to go.”

“Deck Two,” Data said, then added, “I had already decided to make it a personal mission to show her that she is cared for.”

“Yeah.” Geordi held up the PADD. “I think I need to make it a personal mission to also ensure she doesn’t work herself to death trying to keep us happy.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Stardate 47147.8 (Monday 02/23/2370, 22:43) – Mercenary Vessel
– Bridge

“We have entered orbit of Vulcan,” Vekor reported.

Picard nodded. With no immediate reaction from the planetary’s defensive systems, he knew that either their vessel was hidden from detection, no warning had come through, or both. Either way, he had to stop whatever Tallera was up to on his own.

He stood in the middle of the bridge beside Narik’s engineering position and firmly announced, “Tallera, I’ve decided on a change of plan. Take one of the artifacts with you and leave the other here. As soon as we have our payment in full, we’ll complete the delivery.”

She turned to him from her way to the transporter and retorted, “That was not the agreement.”

“I realize that. But it’s safer for all concerned to leave one behind,” he said, testing her in front of everyone.

“They will not pay us until they get both pieces.”

But she has no intention of paying these mercenaries regardless if she’s actually taking the artifacts to the Vulcan authority or not, he thought. I’ll keep their loyalty as long as I appear to be the one who’ll get them their money. It’s time for this charade to end, and as long as I’m tied to the payout, I get to stay alive. He calmly said, “They’ve been waiting a long time for this. They’re not going to take any risks. Now, take one of the artifacts and beam down.”

Just as he anticipated, she called his bluff. “That is all I was waiting for,” she said confidently. “Go to the navigational computer and check file one-three-seven slash omega. You’ll find a message secretly transmitted to the Enterprise, containing our entire flight plan.”

Vekor checked her console and confirmed, “She’s right.”

Tallera smugly announced, “The message was sent by Galen. He’s a Starfleet officer.”

The others all rose and grabbed their weapons.

Picard continued his calm demeanour, knowing full well that everyone standing behind him was now recalculating his value as a hostage, so he intended to make himself an easy, compliant one. “Tallera is right,” he said, “But what she’s not telling you is that those artifacts she’s holding are part of an incredibly powerful weapon. There’s no reward waiting for you down on the surface. As soon as she’s got those artifacts, she’ll leave you behind to be captured by Starfleet.”

Vekor proved his gamble to be the right one as she said from behind him, “I don’t care what it is you want, Tallera. I don’t care if that’s a weapon for your personal use or if you’re really just making a delivery as planned. All I care about is my money. So I propose a compromise: Narik and I will go with you to the surface to guarantee that we receive our payment.”

Narik added, “After that, you can go anywhere you want.”

Tallera looked at the lot of them and their weapons, and clearly made a calculation of her own. “Agreed. Bring him as well,” she said, nodding at Picard. “We’ll use him as a hostage if Starfleet arrives. If not, we’ll kill him on the surface.”

Oh they’ll arrive, Picard thought as he readily allowed Narik to push him forward towards the transporter pad. *I’m staking my life on it.*



Stardate 47147.8 (Monday 02/23/2370, 22:50) – Vulcan –
T’Karath Sanctuary

They beamed into a scarcely-lit stone chamber with carvings on the walls all around. Several elements had been worn down or

outright damaged over the years, but overall it still bore an aura of a mystic time deep in the history of the Vulcan people.

Tallera hurried to an altar shelf to pick up a third piece of the artifact, pointing to a box on the floor nearby. "There," she said dismissively. "Your reward, as promised."

Vekor immediately opened the box and began counting the metallic slips inside.

"Is it all there?" Narik asked from behind where he still had a weapon pointed at Picard.

"No, this is less than half of what we were promised," Vekor said. She stood and pointed her own weapon at Tallera. "Where's the rest of it?"

"That is all I could manage. I suggest you take it and leave," Tallera said as she finished assembly of the pieces.

"I did not come this far to be cheated. I want it all, now!" Narik demanded.

"Very well," Tallera replied softly, gazing at the resonator with profound relief. "You will get what you deserve." She pointed it at him and concentrated. An amber field formed around Narik, loosely at first but then suddenly contracted against him, sending him flying across the chamber with a scream. His limp body smacked against the rear wall and rolled to the ground.

Vekor watched in horror, but just as she was about to use her weapon, Tallera turned the resonator to her and another field appeared, likewise sending her through the air with an anguished last cry.

Picard watched these killings, unable to do anything to stop them but noticing something key about the resonator as Tallera wielded it. He stood firmly in place, but made no moves to attack Tallera or even defend himself.

Tallera glanced at Narik's dropped weapon and said, "Go ahead, Captain. Pick up the phaser. See what good it will do."

He knew it wouldn't do him any good at all, but he also recognized the delight she was taking in her new toy, the pride she exuded for having beaten the mercenaries at their own game to get

to this moment. And he knew from many years' experience that people in the throes of such triumph – even supposedly unemotional Vulcans – can be easily tricked into wasting time trumpeting their achievement. *If she wanted me quickly dead, she could just as easily use her own phaser*, he thought. *She wants me to play along, and I want her to keep up the game as long as I can.*

He goaded her towards pontificating further. “You’ll never get away with this. Starfleet will never stand and watch you tear apart one of the founding worlds of the Federation.”

“How little you understand what you’re facing, Captain,” she said, as so many smug, self-assured extremists of her sort had so many times in his past. “You’re used to fighting enemies like yourself: people on ships with defence shields, energy weapons, warp drives. But this is unlike anything you’ve ever faced. This is the power of the mind.”

Indeed it is, he thought as he stood silently before her, giving her plenty of space to continue to show off her apparent brilliance. *Only not in the way you imagine.*

“Pick up the phaser, Captain,” she ordered, confirming what he already suspected.

At that moment behind her, several people beamed in, including Riker and Worf in front with both Starfleet and Vulcan security officers behind. As glad as Picard was to see them, he immediately understood that the phasers in their hands could be their undoing. “Listen to me, all of you!” he shouted. “Drop your weapons! Do it!”

He did his damndest to give his crew a clear look that said he meant it in spite of how foolish the notion sounded. To his immense relief they obeyed, dropping their phasers to the ground. “Don’t make any aggressive movements,” he explained calmly. “The resonator amplifies violent feelings and emotion.”

Then he turned back to Tallera. “And that’s why you wanted me to pick up the phaser. That’s how you were able to kill Narik and Vekor. But I can see the symbol on that third artifact,” he said as he approached her, “and it is the Vulcan symbol for Peace standing

between the symbols for War and Death. It's a warning that the power of the resonator can be overcome by peace."

Tallera turned the object over in her hands as he spoke, but even when she saw the figure he indicated, she refused to pay it heed. "You are about to see how wrong you are," she snarled, and then turned the resonator towards the others.

"Empty your minds of violent thoughts," Picard ordered, his own heart pounding in fear for his officers, his friends.

The amber field appeared first in front of Riker, but the commander took a deep breath and stood placidly by as it swept over him and dissipated.

Tallera's hands shook, then her arms, and then her whole body as she shouted an anguished, "No!" at the failure of the resonator.

"Think, Tallera," Picard said. "Two thousand years ago your people were being consumed by war, but when peace came to Vulcan, the resonator became useless. That's why it was dismantled."

Tallera tried the device again, this time against Worf. Picard was momentarily concerned that the Vulcan artifact would readily find whatever aggression it needed within a Klingon mind, but then he recalled how often he'd personally observed Worf in meditation, in shared social situations, and being a gentle father to Alexander. As difficult as it was for him at times to maintain his composure, Worf was ultimately a good man whose aggression came from honour and valour, not mindless violence.

Sure enough, Worf stood in peaceful defiance of the amber field as it came towards him, and it did him no harm as it passed through and faded.

The effort of trying to maintain the field coupled with the realization of its failure sent Tallera to her knees, still clutching the resonator and gritting her teeth.

Picard took a knee beside her. "You were right, Tallera. The resonator cannot be stopped by phasers and shields, but it can be defeated by peace."

She turned it on him, grunting one more time but only able to muster a small field which dissipated before it had even fully passed through him. She whimpered in her defeat, and he took the resonator out of her hands.

Picard rose, reverently holding what he deemed to be a valuable artifact for the purposes of study but no longer an object of threat. He smiled tiredly at Riker, who nodded and smiled back.



Stardate 47147.9 (Monday 02/23/2370, 23:15) – Enterprise –
Deck Eight

Picard, Riker, and Data walked slowly through the corridors, catching each other up on everything that had happened.

“Once we realized that you were no longer on the mercenary ship, we scanned the surface for your neural implant,” Riker explained. “We tracked the signal into the caverns.”

“Your timing was impeccable, Number One.”

“What will become of the resonator, sir?” Data asked.

“I met with Security Minister Satok before beaming back up,” Picard replied, “and he has assured me that all three pieces will be destroyed.”

“It is unfortunate it cannot be studied. The resonator is a key artifact from a remarkable period of history,” Data said.

“Normally I would be the first one to agree, but perhaps some things best left in the past,” Picard said as they went around a corner.

“Oh! Welcome back, sir,” said a woman coming around the other way. She gave him an enormously relieved smile.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Picard said with a tired smile of his own. It was the fifteenth such greeting he’d received in the

relatively short space between the transporter room and the corridor outside his quarters. It was good to know he'd been missed, but he was too exhausted to take much more of it. One of the ensigns had burst into tears at the sight of him and then apologized for the duration of the walk on Deck Six.

Riker asked, "What's going to happen to the mercenaries?"

"Tallera's been taken into custody by Satok and he's already begun a search for the rest of the isolationists," Picard answered. "They've seized Baran's ship and everyone still on it will be detained by the Vulcan authorities for the moment. But they're also facing charges from the Klingons, the Cardassians..." He broke off into a yawn before continuing, "...the Ferengi, and at least seven other worlds. I don't think we'll be hearing from them for a while."

They stopped outside of his quarters "Number One, will you set course for Starbase 718? I'll change into more appropriate attire and join you on the bridge shortly."

"Wait a minute," Riker said with a cheeky grin. "You've been declared dead. You can't give orders around here. We're supposed to divert to Deep Space Four now first."

Data furrowed his brow at Riker. "If we are to adhere to the exact letter of Starfleet regulations, then technically, sir, you have been declared a renegade. In fact, I believe you are facing twelve counts of court martial offences. You cannot give orders either, sir."

Riker feigned indignance and straightened his uniform.

Picard nodded solemnly. "That's quite right. And as I'm supposed to be dead, I'll go and get some sleep. And, Mr. Data, I suggest that you escort Commander Riker to the brig before you set our next course."

Riker laughed as Picard turned and entered his quarters.

Data said, "Aye, sir."

Riker began to walk back the way they'd come, but Data grabbed his arm, said, "This way, sir," gently turned him around and began nudging him forward.

"Data, he was joking. You know that, right? Data?"

But Data maintained a thoroughly neutral expression, staring directly forward all the way to the turbolift. Once inside, he said, “Deck Thirty-Three, Brig Two.”

Riker laughed again. “Very funny. Are we done yet?”

In a dead flat tone and still staring directly forward, Data replied, “As you have often pointed out, sir, I have no sense of humour.”

Riker sighed and rolled his eyes. “All right, have your fun. But you do realize I’ve been in command for the past day and a half anyway?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So why arrest me now?”

“I am following the Captain’s orders, sir.”

“But he’s still dead!”

“Indeed, sir. It is an interesting conundrum I intend to ponder extensively during my next bridge shift, sir.”

“Isn’t mutiny against your ethical programming?” Riker asked as the turbolift doors opened and Data nudged him towards the brig.

“Yes, sir. Therefore this must not be mutiny.”

Riker groaned.

They entered the brig and an extremely nervous-looking security ensign stood quickly to attention behind the console. Without another word, Data escorted Riker into the cell, exited the cell, activated the forcefield, went to the console and entered several commands, turned on his heel, and strode out.

The ensign stood staring wide-eyed at Data, then looked to Riker in disbelief.

“It’s not a real thing. I’m not actually under arrest, Ensign Park,” Riker said. “He’s having a bit of fun.”

“Fun? Lieutenant Commander Data, sir?”

“Yes. Don’t let the whole, ‘I don’t feel emotions’ thing fool you. He’s apparently quite capable of pulling a prank.”

“Um, yes sir,” the ensign said, glancing down at the console.

“Why? What’d he enter as a charge?”

Park peered down at the screen. “Uhhh...it says you’re being held pending courts martial or until such time as Captain Picard comes to release you.”

“Right. I don’t suppose you can call the captain for me? He’s back. He’s in his quarters.”

Park visibly squirmed.

“No, of course not,” Riker muttered. “You can’t give in to any prisoner’s request to contact the captain, can you?”

“No sir. Sorry, sir.”

Riker sat on the firm, uncomfortable bed. His cheeky grin returned as he lay back and put his hands behind his head. “I mean for all you know, this is some kind of test to see if you’ll follow the rules.”

“Yes sir,” Park agreed, and then immediately looked even more nervous. “Is it, sir? A test?”

If I’m going to have a bad night, at least I can amuse myself by spreading the pain around, he thought. *Isn’t that what ensigns are for?* He said, “If it was, I wouldn’t tell you, would I?”

“Yes sir. I mean no, sir. I mean, of course not, sir.”

“Am I allowed to ask for a sandwich, at least?”

The young man dutifully recited, “Meals are restricted to the daily schedule and require –“

“- a minimum of two officers on duty to ensure the console is never left unattended, yes. Very good, Ensign. You’re passing with flying colours. So far.”

Park let out a strangled squeak.

Riker grinned at the ceiling, then stretched out, closed his eyes, and decided he’d earned himself a nap.



Several decks above, Picard had just laid down as well. The familiarity of his own bed, his own quarters, all of his things in their place – thankfully not yet removed since apparently nobody

had had the heart do so yet – all of it surrounded him like a favourite old glove, perfect and comfortable in every way.

His eyes closed, his body fell limp, and he immediately began to drift off, but then a thought occurred to him that cut through the peace of it all and made him sit bolt upright.

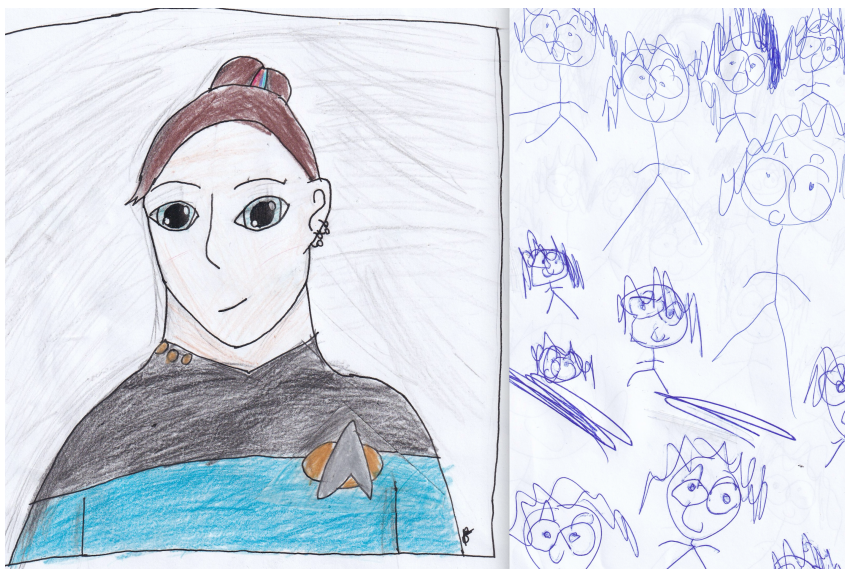
Anna White is on board, isn't she? And nobody's said a word to me about her. Is she still here? Geordi brought her along for the warp installation and that's not done yet so she must be here. Unless...did she come to meet me after all, and leave because I was supposedly dead? No, there hasn't been time for anyone to disembark anywhere reasonable while the Enterprise been chasing after the mercenaries all this time. She must still be on board. Did she think I was dead? Does she know I'm alive? Does she even care either way?

He sighed and lay back down, troubled and tense once more, the whole set of issues resolving themselves down to two core questions: *Do I have a daughter on board? And if so, what the hell am I supposed to do about that?*

Exhaustion overwhelmed him and sent him to sleep, but it was erratic and plagued by nightmares. He found himself standing on a chalky precipice, looking at an all-too familiar village below, watching as the Kataan sun went nova. His imaginary family and friends below succumbed to their long-sealed fate down in Ressik while he was somehow safe above. He could see his daughter Meribor reaching towards him and screaming for his help as she and the others burned, but he was frozen and unable to do anything but listen to their cries and watch their torment from a distance.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kimberly Chapman has been putting her head up onto the Enterprise D since TNG was still on the air. She is a professional writer with a traditionally published novel and more recently has gone independent. She also formerly wrote for Network World Canada and ComputerWorld Canada. While trapped at home during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and inspired by the poignant events of the first seasons of Star Trek: Picard, she decided it was time to start writing down the daydreams she's held dear for most of her adult life and finally give herself the freedom to flesh out the fantasies that remain her mental health escapism.

Her daughters drew the pictures of her on this page.