

SPACEDAD STORIES

THE DREAMS WE DARE TO DREAM



Book Three
A Work of Fan Fiction
By Kimberly Chapman



SpaceDad Book Three

**THE
DREAMS WE
DARE TO
DREAM**

KIMBERLY CHAPMAN

This is a work of fan fiction written for mental health escapism during the coronavirus pandemic. Absolutely no profit is derived or sought from this work, nor any exchange of monetary or other value of any sort. It may be freely shared with all who may enjoy it. All of the Star Trek and musicals references are made without permission of the rights holders and done purely out of deep and abiding love for these cultural elements.

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

Kimberly Chapman
Cambridge, United Kingdom
www.kimberlychapman.com/spacedad

“Seize the time, Meribor. Live now. Make now always the most precious time. Now will never come again.”

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.

PROLOGUE

Stardate 41531.4 (Monday 13/07/2364, 11:46) — Covaris Two —
Surface Coordinates 100619.22, 220619.69

Hot, golden desert dust blew over the rust-coloured rock protruding from the planet's surface; the small particles neatly lining up to flow in rivulets through the eroded ridges and then scatter off the edge to fly once more. Such outcroppings were common all over the Covaris Two landscape, but this was the only one that also bore a climbing bolt that glistened in the bright sunlight. Attached to the bolt's anchor was a blue rope that followed the dusty ridges up and over the rock's scalloped edge, then plunged down into a dark fissure on the other side.

The rope went taut as two gloved hands pulled their way out of the fissure. A figure wearing a tan jumpsuit followed, grunting with the effort of squeezing herself out of the narrow entrance to the cave below. When her left sleeve caught on an edge and tore, she muttered, "Jiminy Crickets!" She then rolled herself out onto the sand, clutching a sample box tightly against herself with her right hand despite it also being held by a strap around her shoulders.

Nineteen-year-old Anna White grumbled, "Ow," squeezed her eyes shut against the outdoor brightness, and then sighed contentedly at her completed spelunking adventure. She reached up with her left hand to pull her protective head cloth and goggles back over her face while grumble-singing, "*It's too darn hot.*"

She opened one eye from behind the goggles to see her left sleeve in tatters, and could already feel the effects of the scorching sun above on the exposed skin. With another grunt, she sat up, moved the sample box to her lap, and wound the remains of her sleeve around her arm.

Anna looked up at the sky, so pretty with its bright blue background swept by wisps of sparkling gold up in the

atmosphere. However, she knew full well how dangerous that beauty was: metal particulate serving as fuel for the thermobaric storms that surrounded the planet. Gravitationally locked in position, this entire half of the planet always faced the sun so the only minimal darkness Anna ever saw was when any available catalyst set off the storms. The ensuing explosions filled the sky anywhere from a few minutes to hours at a time, always reminding her that an unprotected ship didn't stand a chance of escaping the planet without being ripped apart up there.

Thankfully the massive oxygen consumption of the storms only occurred way up in the mesosphere, otherwise she'd have perished within days of the Baltimore's crash when the ship was still riddled with structural damage. She'd repaired all the holes over the years, but recently begun experiments on how to prepare for a new launch, including punching her way through that lethally pretty sky above.

"I've got to follow that yellow-dust road wherever it leads," she said, and then looked at her sample box. "That's what you're for, I hope." She hoisted herself up onto her foot, held her arms out to steady herself, clutched the box again, and then hopped over the sand back towards her shuttlecraft. It was slow, careful going since she wasn't used to moving horizontally in general — much less on soft, uneven terrain — but she made it back to the shuttlecraft and hopped inside, where she promptly plopped down onto the floor to plug her samples into her customised portable analysing and replicating device.

The Baltimore's computer was patched into the shuttlecraft's interface, including the parenting module Anna had never turned off lest she risk losing the only entity that had spoken to her in her nearly fourteen years stranded alone on an L-class world. Being nagged was better than being ignored or forgotten. Nonetheless, Anna gave the console a standard teenager's eye-roll when the computer chirped the sound that designated an incoming warning.

“Warning: unstable samples combined with non-standard replicator configuration may result in explosive combustion,” the computer informed her.

Anna sighed, knowing there was no point in arguing. “Fine,” she replied. “I’ll take it outside.”

“Estimated maximum blast damage exceeds human safety parameters.”

“I’ll be fine, but I don’t want to have to do any extra repair on the shuttle. I need it to point me home to Earth eventually,” she said as she scooted on her backside to drag the heavy replicator assembly outside.

“Exposed dermal layer risks severe sun damage in fifteen —”

“I know, I know. My goodness, what a fuss you’re making! But if it’ll make you feel better: computer, please replicate me a new jumpsuit, pattern Anna-delta-six.”

The standard replicator unit inside the shuttlecraft whirred, and a new suit appeared.

Anna got back up onto her foot and hopped inside to change into it. As she pulled it on she said, “And just to make you stop complaining: computer, a full explosive handling safety kit, please. And a water flask, before you tell me how long since I last hydrated.”

“Four hours, twenty-three minutes, and seventeen seconds have elapsed since previous hydration,” the computer said as a protective blast suit complete with hood and gloves appeared in the replicator along with a standard issue Starfleet water flask.

Anna groaned and wrinkled her nose. “That’s going to be so sweaty in there! Ugh!” But she put it all on anyway, and then hopped back outside to sit astride her modified replicator unit and at long last plugged in her samples.

As the machine began to process the raw trellium-A, Anna lifted the bottom part of the blast hood to pass the water flask under the edge and up to her mouth to drink from it. After a hefty chug, she called back over her shoulder, “See? It’s not exploding!”

The computer did not respond.

Anna muttered, “I do actually know what I’m doing at this point. Haven’t died yet.”

She took another swig just as the machine before her made an alert sound. Anna nearly choked on the water but gulped it down, blinking with wide eyes at the flashing result on the little screen taped onto the side of the machine. A slow grin spread across her face as she saw that she had — at long last! — managed to find a tiny sample of naturally occurring trellium-D embedded within a fragment of the A.

Anna lifted the hood completely off and let it thud into the sand beside her as she read the output numbers. “Jiminy Crickets, that’s a whopper,” she whispered, her heart pounding and happy tears coming to her eyes. “Computer!” she called out loudly. “Analyse replicator assembly data and estimate approximate amount of trellium-D across all samples.”

“Working...estimated availability of trellium-D atoms is between five thousand and eight thousand Daltons.”

“So that’s enough for the minimum four thousand for my synthesis experiment,” she said in awe.

“Current sample contains sufficient trellium-D to begin synthesis project.”

Annas waved her hands in the air excitedly, squealed with joy, and flopped onto her back. She made her hands into fists and pumped them in the air towards the glittering sky above. “Yes, yes, yes!” she shouted, then burst into relieved laughter mingled with a few short sobs of overwhelmed delight. She laughed again, sat up, shimmied back away from the unit, and said, “Computer! Initiate synthesis!”

With another snort of laughter, she cringed back further still with her arms up, since the protective hood still sat beside the machine and it occurred to her that it’d be just her luck for her salvation to explode and kill her on the cusp of success. But once more the machine simply whirred, beeped, and then went silent.

From behind her, the computer reported, *“Trellium-C/D synthesis complete.”*

“Wait, it worked? Already?”

“Synthesis program conforms to project parameters.”

“But does the C/D have the properties I predicted?”

“Program output indicates trellium-C/D conforms to hypothesised properties.”

Anna began to crawl back towards the little machine. “It’ll get the Baltimore through the storms?”

“Insufficient quantity.”

“Right, but if I make enough and apply it as per the modelling?”

“Complete application of trellium-C/D to the entire hull is estimated to provide a ninety-seven-point-three-five per cent chance of sufficient protection against the atmospheric thermobaric storms of Covaris Two.”

“Yes!” Anna shouted, briefly rising up to her knees with her fists in the air again, before collapsing forward with more laughter.

The computer made another alert chirp that prompted Anna to roll back onto her backside to be able to turn and look into the shuttlecraft. “Computer, is there more information?”

“Analysis indicates further potential application for trellium-C/D in Starfleet Project Basher Eighty Four.”

Anna was completely baffled. “Basher Eighty Four? What’s that?”

“Insufficient clearance for project files.”

Anna frowned, raised an eyebrow, and then rolled her eyes again. “Override clearance requirement, like always. Sheesh, haven’t I taught you anything?”

“Files inaccessible.”

“Why?”

“Last Baltimore library update on stardate 27183.1 did not include project files beyond external abstract.”

“So what’s in the external abstract?”

“Preliminary investigations of experimental interphasic fusion techniques.”

Anna's eyes went wide again. "Well that's a horse of a different colour! Interphasic fusion. Golly. That sounds like science fiction. Hm." She considered it for a moment, and then shrugged and scooted back over to her machine. "Well, it's nothing I can get muddled up in for now, anyway." She hoisted the machine up and began to drag it and herself back into the shuttlecraft. "Come on little buddy, I've got a whole big pile of work for you if I'm going to cover the whole Baltimore. Oh dear, it's still going to take me years to get off of this dustball, isn't it?"

"Estimated total synthesis and application time is two years, one hundred and forty-seven days, and eighteen minutes."

"And you never include sleeping time or other repairs in those estimates." Anna rose up on her foot and went to the shuttlecraft controls to begin the journey back to the Baltimore, nearly 150km away. "I'd better get a move on, then!" She laughed again as she closed the shuttlecraft door behind her. "There's no place like home! There's no place like home!"

CHAPTER ONE

Stardate 47217.8 (Saturday 21/03/2370, 12:10) — USS Enterprise
NCC-1701-D — Main Engineering

Nearly six years later, Anna stood by the port power transfer conduit coming out of the warp core of the Starfleet flagship, taking measurements of flow-through rates via a tricorder as part of an impending whole-system upgrade that was based — in part — on theories and power-handling techniques she developed to get the remnants of the Baltimore off of Covaris Two.

It didn't seem to matter how often she told engineers around her that she'd merely been an early contributor to a vast team effort throughout Federation research initiatives; several of them insisted on referring to the new system as "Anna's upgrade". The daunting pressure of that weighed on her heavily and propelled her to attempt to keep tabs on as much of it as possible, lest she be blamed if something were to go wrong.

Because if something goes wrong, the Captain will definitely blame me and stop pretending he doesn't know I'm here, and probably not even bother to drop me off at the next Starbase but chuck me right out the nearest airlock, she thought with a shudder.

"Are you cold?" Lieutenant Reginald Barclay asked behind her. "Wait, no...that...no..." he stammered immediately after asking. "I mean...the PTC is the warmest part of the room. Are your readings off? What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothing, Reg, don't worry," Anna replied quickly. "I'm fine. Everything's fine. Numbers all on spec. It's looking good for Monday's installation." She smiled and nodded at him encouragingly. She'd made a point of working alongside him, having observed how hardly anyone else ever did and hoping to demonstrate friendliness since she knew firsthand that feeling

lonely in a room full of people could sometimes be worse than being literally all alone.

He echoed the smile and the nod, both of them doing it at each other until it got weird. When each noticed how strange it was getting, their smiles turned into grimaces until they both looked away. Anna attempted to focus once more on the tricorder in her hand.

Reg said, “That was...uh...well, like being Darangya and Atrilda stuck in that shuttlepod over Sugohines Seven.” He laughed and added, “Not that tricorders or plasma flow rates or even phase cannons helped them out of that situation, right?”

Anna turned back to him in utter bafflement. “Sorry...who? Where?”

Reg’s smile faded. “Uh...you know, the...uh...well...it’s from the Braypolara books. Book Sixteen? The whole adventure with the Mages of the Galactic Centre?”

“I’m sorry, I haven’t read those,” Anna admitted, feeling guilty that she couldn’t relate. “I haven’t even heard of them.”

Reg’s face twitched back and forth between surprise and derision. “Really? I’d have thought you’d have...I mean...you had plenty of reading time when you were alone on...I just...you probably should have...that is...oh never mind.” He turned abruptly around and stared at the console on the wall.

Anna felt awful. It seemed that every time tried to reach out to him, it backfired in ways she didn’t understand, and then he’d grump around for days after. She was never certain if she was making him nervous or offending him, but this new reaction certainly seemed like the latter. “I’m sorry,” she said again. “I’m sure the joke would be funny if I understood. You can tell me about it, if you’d like,” she offered by way of placation. “I love hearing stories.”

But Reg didn’t even turn around to look at her. He simply shrugged and muttered, “It’s probably too complicated for you to understand. Never mind.”

Anna was literally taken aback, stepping backwards and bumping into the safety railing running alongside the PTC. She stared at the floor, brow furrowed and mouth twisted to the side as she tried to determine if he'd just insulted her or if she was making a mess of interpreting any of this.

Reg suddenly seemed to notice that she might be offended. He turned to her again and said, "I mean...if anyone could understand it'd be...it's just that...well...nobody ever understands me."

Anna tried to smile at him again, hoping to find some common ground at last. "I do actually understand what that's like."

Reg replied, "Maybe a little."

Anna's smile widened.

Reg continued, "Not really, though, because you're female and it's different for females."

Her smile disappeared entirely. "Females?" she asked incredulously.

"Women. Girls. Whatever. It's easier for you," Reg said, waving his hand in the air dismissively.

"It is, is it?"

"Yeah, at least you're wanted."

Anna felt deeply uncomfortable with this turn of the conversation on multiple levels. In a dark tone meant as a warning for him to stop, she retorted, "Not always in the nicest ways."

Apparently missing the warning, Reg scoffed, "Any way is better than not at all."

All of her worries at offending him dissipated as her revulsion for men and their callous attitudes resurfaced for the first time since the creepy Commander Riker had come leering at her in faux welcome at Geordi's birthday party just after she arrived on the Enterprise. Anna stood a little straighter, allowed her antipathy to show openly in her expression, and declared, "No. That isn't true in the slightest."

As she turned to walk away, Reg finally seemed to clue in to how badly he'd overstepped. He hurried after her, jumping to stand

in front of her and say, “I didn’t mean...not like that! Not like Loxos! I wasn’t talking about...you know...that!”

Anna glared, skirting around him so widely that she almost bumped into two other engineers working at another console. She scurried over to the chief engineer’s office corner where she frequently worked, sat down at her usual console, and began wildly opening LCARS screens in order to appear busy enough that nobody would ask her why her hands were trembling or her jaw was clenched. A lingering sense of self-doubt nagged at her, making her wonder if she was being unfair to Reg, but her lurching stomach and racing pulse told her on an instinctive level that she was right to have ended that conversation as she did.

If only my stupid brain would agree with my squeelchy guts, she thought, suddenly feeling all of the stress and pressure building up on her more than ever. Suppressing tears, she tried to focus instead on further programming upgrades necessary for the new drive. She opened more fields before her than she could possibly concentrate on at a time, but made herself read over each of them in an attempt to calm herself.

It had just begun to work when Geordi came up behind her, beginning his greeting from far enough away to avoid making her jump; something she’d specifically requested as a condition of agreeing to come on board. It always made her feel better whenever anyone remembered to do it. Not that it was strictly necessary when she was at this particular console since she’d also gotten used to routinely glancing up to the window to the drive above the workstation to check for reflections of anyone approaching, but even the smallest shred of concern always helped.

“Hey Anna, how’s it going?” Geordi said, his voice sounding tired but friendly.

Anna turned in her chair. “Just working through some calculations. Are you okay?” She was worried about him; they’d sat in the large break room talking about his mother nearly all night because the Hera disappeared and was presumed destroyed with all hands lost, including Captain La Forge. Geordi had needed

someone to talk to, and Anna had been happy to listen to tales of what a loving family was like.

“Ready for work, doing okay, thanks for asking,” Geordi said with a smile, but then he frowned. “Are you okay? You look stressed out.”

“I’m fine,” Anna lied, guessing Geordi was probably lying as well, though she was never sure of reading other people.

“I don’t know,” he replied skeptically. “Look, Anna, this whole thing, it’s not just on you.”

Anna was confused how Geordi could know so quickly that she’d just argued with Reg.

Geordi continued, “A new engine is a big project. You need to stop trying to hold everything up yourself. We’re a team. We all pull together, okay?”

Relief swept over her. *He’s talking about engineering stuff, not people stuff*, she thought. She replied, “Yeah, thanks, I get that. I’m fine. I’m just tired.”

“I kept you up all night with my family stories,” he said remorsefully.

Anna smiled at him, hoping to continue to help him as much as she knew how. “It was nice of you to share them.”

Geordi sat down in his chair opposite hers. “Thanks, by the way. For all of it. Not just listening last night, but the way you supported me when I thought my mom was still...” He trailed off into a sigh. “Even being wrong, having someone believe what I was saying...that was really important. Thank you. You’re a really good friend, Anna.”

“Me?” she asked incredulously, given her failure with Reg.

“Yeah, you,” Geordi said with a chuckle. “You’re always overly impressed when Data or I show you the smallest bit of kindness, and I get it because you haven’t had friends before, but you should know that it’s not just one-sided. You act like our friendship towards you is some great treasure, but your friendship to us is pretty special too.”

A warm feeling cascaded all over her, almost making her want to cry or sing out. She suppressed both of those reactions and instead said, “Gosh. I actually really needed to hear that right now, only I didn’t know it until you said it.”

“I guess that’s what friendship is too: being nice and learning to count on others being nice to you when you need it.”

Anna put her hands over her heart. “That’s beautiful.”

Geordi nodded. “Yeah. It is. Thanks for being here, Anna. I’m really glad you are.”

He turned to his console and she turned back to hers, letting a few tears of relieved joy spill out before getting back to her other comfort of lovely warp physics equations.



Stardate 47217.9 (Saturday 21/03/2370, 12:28) — Bridge —
Ready Room

“Tea, Earl Grey, hot,” Captain Jean-Luc Picard demanded of his replicator. He carried it over to his desk, sat down, and rubbed his forehead. He’d spent the morning with his first officer working out how to officially report what had happened with the Raman at Marijne Seven, where his second officer and his chief engineer had both directly disobeyed orders and put the latter’s life in jeopardy. Ordinarily such actions had a standard set of remedies, but in this case their disobedience had resulted in saving the lives of an unknown species that had inadvertently been scooped up by the Raman’s experiments and who had in turn inadvertently killed the Raman’s crew.

It had all been — as Riker had phrased it — a “self-perpetuating shitstorm of conflicting need, values, and big, damn headaches.” But since neither of them could use such language in their official reports, they’d had to carefully work out how to write the truth while protecting their officers, themselves, and the lost

Raman crew on the wreckage that had descended into Marijne Seven's atmosphere beyond reach.

Picard found himself unduly exhausted after that tedious task, only to realise that he'd been considering such exhaustion as "unduly" for weeks now, which at some point made it routine exhaustion. The truth of it was he hadn't had a decent night's sleep since learning about the existence of Anna White at the start of the year when Geordi mentioned bringing her aboard as an expert consultant for the new drive. He'd never heard of her before that meeting, but it had quickly become privately apparent to him that there was a chance he was her biological father, as her mother was someone with whom he'd had an intimate relationship within the time frame that made his paternity a possibility.

Since that meeting, he'd been falsely "crashed" onto a remote planet as part of an alien study of human emotions, abducted by mercenaries and forced to play along to survive, coped with a diplomatic crisis when part of a Tarkanian delegation had a failed attempt at violent espionage in main engineering, and then the unfortunate business at Marijne with the Raman. On top of all that he'd had to inform Geordi about the Hera and his mother's likely demise, all while wondering when he'd ever be allowed to finally meet this potential daughter of his own.

One of White's stipulations for coming aboard was to not be contacted by command staff. At first, nobody had been sure of why or who that meant, but over the ensuing weeks both he and Counselor Deanna Troi — who had quickly sussed out his paternity suspicions — had come to agree that White meant she didn't want him in particular talking to her at all for any reason. This had been further confirmed by her apparent hiding somewhere in engineering when he'd entered along with the Tarkanians on their initial impromptu tour.

"Conflicting needs, values, and big, damned headaches indeed," Picard muttered as he picked up his tea to sip it, hoping it would soothe him emotionally as much as it did physically. Deanna had been adamant that he was not to violate Anna's boundary until the

young woman made overtures of her own to meet him first, and while he saw the wisdom in that and conveniently hid behind it when he felt uncomfortable with the whole notion, he remained irked at being told he couldn't talk to someone on board his own ship.

Picard reflected on how frequent it was for the Enterprise to have multiple crises overlapping each other, and how for the most part he was able to handle all of it in stride. Holding the warm cup in his hands, he came to the conclusion that his exhaustion was much less about job stress and almost entirely personal anxiety, with his lack of control in that regard as the worst part of it all.



Out on the bridge, Data was also thinking about Anna. To be more precise, he was dedicating an average of sixty-four point seven per cent of his processing power to considering issues pertaining to her, while the remainder of his thoughts were managing the ops console before him, staying attuned to his colleagues on the bridge around him, concern for his friend Geordi's recent bereavement, contemplating his own upcoming duties with the drive replacement, his regular tracking of his cat Spot's needs, an intention to resume his study of ancient Doosodarian poetry, considering potential themes for his next painting, pondering the relative staging differences of several plays he was interested in performing with other members of the crew, and an assortment of other routine calculations.

Sixty-four point seven per cent was an unusually high proportion for any single person to occupy in Data's mind, but it was not even the highest proportion Anna had held since coming aboard. The very fact that she dominated his thoughts made him wonder why, which in turn dominated his thoughts further, which then spun into self-perpetuating logic spirals that threatened to actually distract him; something he had previously considered nearly impossible.

Yet there he sat, tapping sensor readouts and other standard operations at his console, all while compiling optimised lists of jokes to tell Anna, calculating how much time he would likely get to spend working with her during the warp core upgrade, indulging in the pleasant memories of having introduced her to Keiko's arboretum and the holodeck, analysing his concern for her continued fear to spend time in the saucer section where she might encounter the command personnel she clearly wished to avoid, and wondering how best to support her when she fled and hid up above the warp drive on the narrow, circular ledge on the ceiling where it ascended into decks above.

Data did not like that he had not had time to visit Anna since she had left the cybernetics lab the night before upon his warning that command staff were likely to come, given that he and Geordi had disobeyed orders to allow Geordi to return to the Raman via the interface suit and linked probe unit. He admired how she had steadfastly supported Geordi in attempting to rescue the Hera crew, even though it was unlikely from the start that the Hera was on Marijne Seven at all. Anna's insistence on trying to do the right thing was profoundly meaningful to him in spite of the complicated issues pertaining to Geordi's unsanctioned use of the interface suit, and it bothered Data that he had not yet had the chance to speak with Anna to assure her that he appreciated her intentions.

However, his schedule kept him busy on the bridge during this shift and the next, and he had made an agreement with her that he would not neglect professional commitments in order to offer her support because she felt that she could not comfortably accept said support if it conflicted with his duties.

Thus — much as he experienced an unusual drive to abandon his post to check on her — Data instead satisfied himself by repeatedly checking that the main engineering sensors and data logs showed her as working at her usual console there, with Geordi also present. All of this meant Anna must be operating within

sufficient comfort to not require him to violate his professional obligation to remain exactly where he was.



Stardate 47218.1 (Saturday 21/03/2370, 14:55) — Main Engineering

Data was not alone in keeping a close eye on Anna's wellbeing. Lieutenant Aisling Navarro had spent the entire afternoon watching Anna in main engineering. She could tell something was up with Anna but not precisely what. So many of the engineering crew were in and out of the main room all day that it was difficult to know if someone had offended or threatened the young specialist, though Aisling had a particular likely culprit in mind.

Since it was part of Aisling's duties to monitor and log the duty roster in her dual role of engineer and security officer, she took an extra minute at the end of first shift to look up where Lieutenant Dean Covett had been all day. She was surprised to find he'd been relegated to ODN maintenance in the saucer section for the entire shift. *Wow, I guess Geordi made good on his promise to keep Dean away from Anna after all,* Aisling thought. Dean had done himself no service in heckling Anna's presentation about the drive six days prior; the audience had turned on him in support of Anna, no doubt giving Geordi the impetus he needed to finally reign in what Aisling always thought of as Dean's "asshattery".

But if Dean wasn't here to make her all cringed up at the console like she is now, then who or what has? Must've been the Raman stuff? she surmised, having heard that Anna had helped Geordi get back into his interface suit before Data took over. *Apparently the Captain was furious but nobody seems to be getting in any real trouble. It's all pretty weird. I need to figure out what's up with Anna and if she's okay.*

Aisling went wide around the central table console to ensure she wasn't approaching Anna from behind, which also gave her the opportunity to nod a silent beckoning at Ensign Andrea Tyler, who was wrapping up her shift at a wall console on the opposite side of the wide entrance to the drive bay. Andrea smiled tiredly in acknowledgement and followed Aisling over to where Anna was working.

"Hey there, warp queen, it's about to be shift end," Aisling said to Anna. "Come stretch your legs with Andrea and I. You look spent."

Anna looked up at them with eyes red with exhaustion — at least, Aisling hoped it was mere exhaustion and not that she'd been crying. But before she could think of a way to subtly ask, Anna reached down and adjusted her artificial leg, which Aisling hadn't noticed was partly off within her baggy jumpsuit pant leg.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry!" Aisling said in horror at her leg-stretching invitation. "I did it again, didn't I? Put my...oh shit."

Anna smiled. "Put your foot in it?"

Aisling groaned. *This isn't going how I intended at all.*

But Anna laughed it off. "It's okay, I always find that one funny. And no, I've never put my fake foot in my mouth. Or my biological one either."

Andrea awkwardly interjected, "Babies put their toes in their mouths. You probably did that."

Anna shrugged as she stood. "Maybe, but there's nobody left alive who'd remember. Anyway, leg-stretching of all sorts sounds like a good idea." She leaned in close to whisper to the other two, "I've got chair numb-bum," and then gave them a little cheeky smile.

As the three walked out of main engineering, Aisling tried to get back on track with what she wanted to discuss. "Are you okay, Anna? From what I hear, yesterday was pretty nuts with the Raman and Geordi and all that."

Anna seemed surprised at the question as they strolled down the corridor towards port. "Word sure does travel fast around here."

“Well, it’s a small community, really. And you tried to help save the boss’ mom. I told you you’d figure out how to help if an opportunity arose.”

Anna shrugged. “It wasn’t Geordi’s mom at all, though.”

Aisling gently said, “No, but you tried anyway.”

Andrea wistfully added, “I’d have helped too, if I’d had the chance.”

“We all would have,” Aisling agreed. “But it all happened so fast.”

“It’s good to know others would’ve jumped in too, actually,” Anna replied. “I felt like I had to do something. When I found out I’d been left alone all those years on purpose, I swore I’d never let that happen to anybody else.”

Aisling’s blood ran cold. She’d thought Anna had helped Geordi because of their discussion about what to do for a grieving friend; it hadn’t occurred to her that Anna would see it as an abandonment issue. “Anna, you do know that you being left on Covaris was a mistake, right? The Yosemite didn’t know there was a child on the Baltimore. They didn’t know to scan for kids, and scanning tech back then would’ve needed that parameter set.”

Anna shrugged again, but this time it was a curt little action of annoyance. “Yeah, I’ve been told all that. Doesn’t really help, to be honest. Because it wasn’t just the Yosemite. They put the warning buoy about the storms in place, but I made sure I had that distress signal going the whole time because I didn’t know about the buoy until after I launched. Lots of people on lots of ships ignored me. None of them even tried better scanning in all that time. Do you have any idea how many Starfleet vessels officially passed within range of my distress call in the years I was on Covaris?” she asked bitterly.

Aisling felt a lump forming in her throat. “No, but I get the feeling you do.”

“Twelve,” Anna spat.

Although Aisling recognised the anger wasn’t aimed at her personally, she felt it on behalf of Starfleet’s failure. As they

rounded a corner, she glanced towards Andrea and saw the young Ensign cringing as well.

Anna continued, “And that’s just the ones that are on searchable record for it. Probably several more. And okay, fair enough, if the storms were going it was harder to detect. And fair enough, it was a weak and boring signal, just that standard Starfleet repeating signal because by the time I figured out I could change the message, I thought nobody was around to hear.”

Anna stopped walking, so the other two stopped with her. She stared at the floor, shaking her head slowly. “But they did hear. I’ve found four logged records of passing vessels that heard it and assumed — based on the original Yosemite report and warning buoy — that it was just a remnant. In each of those four cases words like ‘eerie’ and ‘creepy’ and ‘spooky’ were used. Not one of them thought, ‘Hey, let’s check a little further. Let’s see if maybe there is actually someone down there after all of this time begging for help.’ Not one,” she said, looking up at the others.

“That’s so sad,” Andrea said.

“Yeah. It hurts me still. A lot. Every day,” Anna hesitantly admitted.

Aisling abandoned all intention to discuss any other issue, her heart breaking for what Anna had been through. “Oh honey, I’m so sorry.”

Anna shrugged yet again and began walking once more. “I don’t blame any of the regular crew here. The Enterprise never came close that I know of. I’m sure the Captain always made sure of that,” she grumbled darkly. “But the Yamaguchi and the Wellington were two of the four with records of having heard my ‘eerie’ signal, and those are Ambassador class and Niagara class, both with updated lifeform sensors compared to what the Yosemite had when it first scanned the wreckage. Plus I was a lot bigger when each of them came along. They could have checked. They could have taken an hour to pop by for a look at what was up with that signal. They didn’t. I wasn’t worth the effort, dead or alive, and I have to live with that every day. So yeah, any time there’s

even a slim chance to try to save someone else? I'm always going to be on the side of at least trying."

"Of course you are," Aisling replied. "I think probably most of us are, but I wouldn't blame you if you don't believe that."

"The Enterprise command staff didn't want Geordi to look for his mom," Anna with significant animosity.

Aisling realised she needed to tread very carefully. Anna was taking a lot of wide swings that may have been justified from her point of view. But as a security officer with an overly impressionable young Ensign beside her, Aisling had an obligation to respond professionally as well. She cautiously said, "Well...yeah. They have a duty to keep officers safe too."

Anna scoffed and pressed her lips together.

Aisling quickly added, "But I get how that might not look like that to you."

"No, it doesn't," Anna retorted. But then she sighed tiredly and said, "I'm sorry. It's been a hard day. I think I should go up to my quarters before I fail at any more social stuff."

"You're not failing at anything," Andrea said.

Anna mustered a little smile, but then turned around and left back the way they'd come.

"Well that didn't go as planned," Aisling muttered.

"Maybe the pressure of the new drive installation is getting to her," Andrea suggested. "She's been pulling too many shifts."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Help me keep an eye out for her?"

Andrea nodded, and the two resumed walking.

CHAPTER TWO

Stardate 47218.1 (Saturday 21/03/2370, 15:02) — Counselor Troi's Office

“I'm glad you've come,” Counselor Deanna Troi said to Geordi as he sat down on her couch. “How are you doing?”

“About as you'd expect,” Geordi said. “I'm sorry about my attitude last time I was in here.”

“You were angry and upset.”

“Yeah.”

“And now?”

Geordi sighed. “Less angry, at least at everyone else. Maybe a little angry at myself for being duped by the thing pretending to be my mother. Then again, even if it was all fake, it was nice to have that chance to say goodbye.” He folded his hands on his lap and quietly admitted, “Maybe you were right about some of that fantasy stuff. I still want her to be okay out there somewhere.”

“Of course you do,” Deanna said gently.

“I'm trying to tell myself more firmly that she's probably gone, even if we never get any proof of it. It's...hard.”

Deanna nodded.

Geordi chuckled. “And you're not going to like this part, but I'm burying myself in the upcoming drive replacement to shove all the personal stuff to the side.”

“It's not about whether I like something or not. It's about what's right for you, and if you're mindfully setting something aside until you can better cope with it, that's not a bad thing.”

“Really?” Geordi asked in surprise. “Huh. I thought for sure you were going to make me deal with it here and now.”

“Geordi, I rarely force anyone to deal with anything in any given moment. That's not how therapy works. It's a process, a journey. I'm a guide, not the boss.”

“I guess. Anyway, my dad and sister and I are working out when we can meet up to have a personal memorial service. It’s tricky because we’re all so busy, but being busy is part of the guilt, like you said last time. That makes it hard to plan because...I’d just rather not, you know?”

Deanna nodded again.

Geordi wiped his palms on his knees. “So...anyway...I’m trying to do better but I’m also not in some ways, I guess. I did have a really, really long talk about Mom with Anna White, though. She stayed up most of the night with me listening to me tell stories.”

Deanna was surprised. “That’s...very good of her,” she said carefully.

“Yeah. Turns out she’s really into hearing family stories since she doesn’t have any of her own.”

“So it was a positive conversation for both of you?”

“It was. I made sure to thank her for it today. She gets herself all wound up about social stuff so I wanted to make sure she really knew that she’s appreciated and not just for her technical knowledge.”

Deanna had intended to catch up with Geordi about Anna soon and was reluctant to turn his therapy session towards that goal. But what he was saying raised a lot of important points both personally and professionally, so she decided to allow the topic to continue. “That’s very good of you, Geordi. I’m fairly certain she needs that kind of positive guidance.”

“Yeah. I was worried I pushed her too hard on giving that speech last week, but then she knocked it out of the park. She goes up and down a lot: scared one minute, then full throttle the next. But she’s a valuable part of our team in so many ways and I want her to feel safe here so she’ll stay on after the upgrade, so I’m trying to balance it all. I didn’t expect her to be the one who’d support me so strongly about the Raman, but it meant a lot that she did. I know the rest of you were trying to keep me grounded in reality, and you were all right about that, but having someone

believe me even when I was being ridiculous...I guess there's something special in that. I made sure she knows that."

"Good. I'm glad you found that support, although I do have to raise a bit of a red flag about it."

"What? How come?"

"Geordi, do you know what 'fawning' is?"

"What, like when you are interested in someone and you fall over yourself to be nice to them and send flowers and stuff? Because it's not like that at all, Counselor. I am not into Anna in that way and I'm certain she isn't interested in me."

"That's one definition, yes, but not what I meant. In this context, fawning is something adults who were traumatised as children do, usually stemming from abuse or neglect."

"Well Anna was definitely neglected, at an extreme level."

"Exactly. Fawning is a way of trying to appeal to others so they'll like you because you don't think someone will simply like you for yourself. As you say, in a romantic context it would involve giving traditional gifts of courtship. In the case of an abuse victim, it's discerning the needs of others and going above and beyond to meet those needs, often to the point of self-detriment, constantly trying to be helpful and useful, making themselves indispensable so nobody will dispense of them. On the surface it can seem very positive, but it's a maladaptive survival response, a way of creating safety in connections with others by essentially mirroring the imagined expectations and desires of other people at one's own expense."

Geordi nodded. "Yeah, that's Anna all right in terms of the drive project. Although with the Raman, she was pretty clear that she wanted to help because she resents that nobody helped her when she was all alone on Covaris. I'd say it was less about trying to impress me and more about a deep need to not let anyone else suffer what she went through."

"Most likely it was a blend of multiple factors. And I don't mean to imply she wasn't trying to also support you, because she likely was trying to be a good friend as well. That's what makes

some of this difficult: all of these personal and professional threads get tangled up pretty easily for all of us. Add in some hefty trauma and the tangle gets even worse.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“So while it’s good that you’ve made certain to tell her that you appreciated her, and while I’m very happy for both of you that you shared a meaningful conversation, on some level as a supervisor you need to keep an eye out for the maladaptive side of it.”

“Gotcha. How do I do that?”

“The most important thing is to keep up a consistently supportive atmosphere where Anna feels safe enough to give herself a break. Make sure she knows she’s always allowed to say no when she has to without punishment or risk of disappointing you. If she seems frustrated or angry, validate those emotions so she learns she doesn’t have to always put on a smile to keep you happy at her own expense. She may do things like apologize frequently for things that are clearly not her fault, or may appear to be irrationally afraid of something you deem inconsequential but then turn around and appear to have no fear for an actually dangerous situation where she’s eager to please.”

Geordi chuckled. “Are you sure you haven’t met her? Because you’re describing her pretty accurately.”

“I wish I could, but we both know she’s stipulated strongly that I’m not allowed near her, and I have every intention of respecting that boundary until she’s ready to reconsider it. I can predict these things because they’re all sadly very common to people who grew up without a loving, caring, stable home. But I would like to stay in touch with you about her — albeit outside of what should be your own therapy session in the future. We should establish a regular meeting schedule.”

“Yeah, we can do that.” He smiled to the side and admitted, “I was kind of glad to switch the topic off of me today anyway.”

“I know, and that’s why I let you. But let’s separate these tracks going forward. Also, Geordi, as much as I’d like you to pay attention to Anna within your administrative role, I want you to

remember that you're not a therapist. Don't try to be one. Be exactly what you are: a supervisor and a friend, there to help and support, not fix."

"You mean don't look at Anna like an engineering problem."

"Exactly. If you see something going on that worries you, come to me about it within whatever ways you can that still respect her privacy and her trust of you. It's essential that she continue to be able to trust you, so I'm not asking you to spy on her. I'm saying come to me in professional confidence when necessary and let me help you help her until she lets me do so directly. We need to be very careful and above-board procedurally here so we can maximise support without breaching privacy. It's going to be difficult at times, but I believe if we both have the best of honest intentions, we can help her find the foundation she needs to reach out for more help later."

"Got it. I just wish she knew how much you're standing here in the background caring about her."

"Maybe someday that'll happen. For now, it's all about creating a safe environment for her to figure out how she wants to settle in on her own terms. And for you, it's making sure you have the support for what you're going through so you can continue to build this friendship and this working relationship. Always remember, Geordi: even when you think the rest of us aren't hearing you, we are, and we're all in the background caring for you as well."

Geordi sighed again. "Yeah. Funny how it's a lot easier to give help sometimes than to accept it, isn't it?"

"That's why we're all in this together, supporting each other as best as we can, as often as we can. That's what this crew is all about."



Stardate 47218.2 (Saturday 21/03/2370, 15:20) — Deck Thirty-One — Anna's Quarters

As soon as Anna arrived in her quarters, she kicked off her leg and flopped on her little couch, annoyed on multiple levels. She was annoyed at herself for talking too much about Covaris to Aisling and Andrea when they hadn't asked to hear any of that. She was still annoyed at Reg for his nonsense. And as so often was the case, she was utterly furious at Picard for everything that he was.

A duty to keep officers safe? she thought bitterly, recalling Aisling's attempt at an excuse for the pathetic attitude of the command staff regarding the Raman. *From what I've read, Picard went full Borg and got the Yamaguchi and a whole bunch of other ships destroyed at Wolf 359, but now somehow he gets credit for trying to keep Geordi safe instead of helping him rescue his mom? I don't think so. How the hell does that monster have all these nice people fooled so well?*

Anna groaned and rubbed her eyes. She didn't want to think about Picard, or Covaris, or anything awful. She just wanted to concentrate on the job she was there to do and how good it felt to have real friends who seemed to like having her around. But the thought of friends brought Reg to mind again, prompting her into an expression of ire.

I need a distraction, she thought. *Maybe if I read those books Reg mentioned, I can patch that whole business up. I'm not sure if it's him or me that's at fault but if I at least try as hard as I can, I'll know it's not me. Problem is, I hate reading.*

For all that Anna loved stories, she had always struggled with text. Her eyes didn't want to follow the lines, and her brain wanted the input faster than her eyes could manage. This meant she couldn't help but skim things over, which meant she missed a lot of it, which in turn left gaps in non-fictional subjects and an inability to become invested in fiction. Much as she might desire to know the story or the information in a book, she had never been able to physically make it work in any satisfying way.

She had two primary solutions: for non-fiction like science textbooks or operational manuals, she'd simply look at the page

and take a mental picture of it. Her eidetic memory recorded the image even though she didn't really know what was in the image, but if she recalled it later, she could mentally "read" the text from the memory of the page. It didn't work with any topic; she had to be interested in it, she had to understand the subject matter enough that the words came out clearly, and she'd found that black text on a white background worked much better than the inverse. Diagrams were particularly easy to record in this fashion, so information presented graphically pleased her enormously.

The second solution pertained to fiction and was also very pleasing: she had the computer read the text to her, or listened to an audiobook if one had been recorded. She'd spent hours of her youth happily listening to stories read to her by the Baltimore as she worked on fixing the ship. Her preference was always her precious musical songs and movies on in the background, but for variety she occasionally put on a book instead.

It occurred to her that it was strange that she'd never heard of the Braypolara books Reg mentioned, if they were as commonly known as he insinuated. She frowned and asked, "Computer, what are the Braypolara books?"

The Enterprise's computer replied, "*The Braypolara System is a series of forty-seven books by author Nallan Odatto, portraying the adventures of several generations of spacefaring characters with magical powers.*"

"That's a lot of books," Anna muttered. "Computer, tell me about the first book in the series."

"*Braypolara Book One: The Exploding Tavern of Uzzone Four, first published on stardate 32637 —*"

"Wait, 32637? Isn't that like...about 2355?"

"*Stardate 32637 translates to the Earth date of the twenty-fifth of August, 2355.*"

Anna's anger was freshly renewed. *He expected me to have read those while I was on the Baltimore even though they came out nearly five years after we crashed? If I'd been able to download fresh libraries, I'd have had enough contact with home to call for*

help instead of having to get myself out of there! What the hell, Reg?

She growled loudly, her lips curled in a snarl. She had half a mind to go back down to engineering and tell him off, but figured that would not go well in terms of her desire to stay on board after the upgrade. Instead, she crossed her arms and turned over so she was facing the back of the couch. There she remained, grumpy and pouting, exhausted and confused, until she fell into an uncomfortable doze.



Stardate 47218.7 (Saturday 21/03/2370, 20:10) — Deck Eight —
Picard's Quarters

Picard found that his tired eyes were not truly reading his book so much as skimming the familiar text and prompting memories of what happened in his current chapter. He closed it, and then reverentially traced his fingers over the ancient leather cover, taking the time to enjoy the tactile sensation of the tips of his fingers falling into the embossed lettering. Whatever paint or dye had been embedded in those letters had been worn away long before the book had come to him, but the pleasing indentations remained.

He glanced at his desk, where the enticing isolinear chip holding Anna's logs from the Baltimore lay. The first two he'd watched had been utterly exhausting; she spoke and sang interchangeably at a barely-comprehensible speed, clearly unused to conversing with other people. That made sense, of course, but only added to his guilt over the whole thing.

Yet for her nearly unintelligible patter, she had incredible presence throughout, drawing the viewer in and dragging them along with her as she bounced around her ship. She didn't merely tell the camera what she was feeling; it was as if she reached

through it to seize the viewer's heart and soul and make them experience all of her hope, all of her fear, all of the danger and triumphs as though present aboard the Baltimore with her. It was a remarkable experience but quite draining, and Picard simultaneously feared and longed for more.

He rose, set the book back on the shelf, and then sat tentatively at the desk. He rubbed his forehead, and then slid his hand over his mouth in thought. Finally, he decided to read some of the other files Deanna had given him about Anna instead.

One of the PADDs she'd provided contained Anna's education record as retrieved from the Baltimore's system via the research team that went back for the abandoned vessel after she'd been abducted from it to the Carbonaria. Desperate to keep thoughts of the tortures she'd endured there at bay, Picard quickly opened the file to read the computerised assessment.

Though children were not usually permitted on Starfleet operational vessels back in that day, someone had loaded an early version of the Care and Educational Modules now common to Federation starships onto the Baltimore before its launch. The record showed that Anna's mother Meredith had engaged it in transit, ostensibly to begin the child's schooling since she was four years old when they left Earth. Apparently the module had continued operations after the crash that had killed all the adults, maintaining consistent records of Anna's educational and basic health progress.

The computerised records lacked the sort of detail or warmth a human teacher would provide, but were extremely thorough. He could see how she had progressed through all of the early lessons quickly, and agreed with the computerised assessment that she'd entered the program already knowing more than the average four-year-old.

He could not help but grin at the further assessment based on her rapid lessons where the computer calculated a likelihood of "insufficient information retention due to excessive speed in lesson completion." Skimming through further, he laughed when he found

the terse notation that Anna had bypassed the system's controls to seize control of her learning entirely.

Picard found himself recalling his own school days when he eagerly tried to please his teachers, including fussy old Monsieur Ormond for whom everything had to be done correctly, in the correct order, in the correct time. He hated Ormond's fastidiousness but had learned to excel at jumping through his hoops again and again. There was a satisfaction in beating a finicky teacher at his own game.

I wonder if Anna derived the same satisfaction in wresting control from the Baltimore's computer, he pondered. I wonder if — given her lack of socialisation — she now possesses the skills to win against the likes of Monsieur Ormond, or is she simply so brilliant that she'd be the sort Monsieur Ormond would detest from the start as a threat to his ego?

He blinked at himself in surprise to realise how readily he'd imagined a young Anna into his world, casting her into his home town, his school, his meadows and forests, his family home.

With a wry chuckle, he shook his head to imagine Robert's reaction if Meredith had been upfront about the baby and if he'd brought her to the chateau to be raised there. *And then what?* he wondered. *Would I have left to go back to the Stargazer? Would Robert have cared for this child? Wait no — Father was still alive in 2345 when Anna was born. If I'd brought home an unexpected infant for Father and Robert to raise...*

He shuddered. For all that he'd somewhat reconciled with Robert in recent years, he chalked most of that success up to Robert's wife Marie's influence. Likewise, the tenderness he'd observed between Robert and Rene was certainly nothing he'd experienced from either Father or Robert, indicating that too was likely stemming from Marie's presence.

Certainly if I'd brought an infant to Marie, that child would have had a loving home. But with Father and Robert? Then again, Father and Robert always had a particular reverence for family, so perhaps they'd have been stern but kind with baby Anna, reserving

their ire for me but not inflicting it upon the innocent child. Or perhaps not at first, anyway. Surely they'd resent me and take it out on her in some way or other.

Once again, he was astonished to discover how readily his mind accepted Anna as family despite there still being no concrete proof of a relationship. But the dread of his father's unpleasantness made him shudder once more, and know that he could not have ever left a baby in that man's care.

Why am I even thinking about this? Meredith clearly was never going to give me the opportunity to make any of these choices.

Picard grumbled, shook off the entire question, picked up the isolinear chip, and plugged it into his terminal to call up Anna's next log.



At the same time many decks below, Anna hung upside down from her knees on the Jefferies tube ladder that led into main engineering to scope out who was in there and doing what before she committed herself to entering. Peeking under the edge of the door, she saw several people paying attention to consoles, but no sign of any of her preferred co-workers other than Geordi, who was rolling around on his chair between the consoles in his corner. She also couldn't see Reg, but that wasn't conclusive since he usually skulked around the drive area.

Anna righted herself and crept unobtrusively into the room, simultaneously glad she wouldn't have to deal with Reg but also still annoyed at him and somewhat frustrated that her rehearsed rebuttals would have to wait. She was glad Aisling and Andrea weren't there, since she still felt guilty about how her conversation had gone with them and wasn't up to figuring out how to rectify any of that, or if it was even needed.

Nobody paid her any heed as she headed over to her usual console. Even Geordi was too busy to notice her until she slid into

her chair, at which point he exclaimed, “Oh, you’re here! You okay?”

“Yeah. Figured you could use some help on the alignment discrepancies.”

Geordi grinned. “I was really hoping you’d say that. It’s tedious and I’ve got too much on my mind to pay proper attention to it.”

“I like tedious matchy-matchy work,” Anna replied.

“I know, and I deeply appreciate it!” he said with a little laugh before returning to his own console. “But only do it if you want to. Don’t feel obligated.”

“It’s fine, Geordi,” she replied. Then she thought, *It’s so nice to be wanted for stuff I actually like to do.* She smiled as she called up the fresh report screens and began to hunt down pesky anomalies.



Meanwhile in Picard’s quarters, he sat back, took a deep breath, and prepared himself for another loud, chaotic, bouncing, song-and-dance number disguised as a log entry from Anna. The stardate and timestamp in the listing indicated it was recorded within an hour of when she’d successfully launched the Baltimore off of Covaris Two, so he anticipated giddy system checks and more triumphant singing.

Thus he was taken aback with great concern to see the entry begin with Anna still sitting in the EV suit with the helmet off, staring to the side of the imager, looking quite pale and red-eyed, as if she’d been crying. She started to speak, but then stopped, looked confused, shook her head, blinked several times, and continued staring into space.

Something’s gone terribly wrong, Picard realised. But she seems to be breathing fine and there aren’t any alarms going off. What’s happened?

“I...” she began, but then once again shook her head and sighed. She put her left fingers over her closed mouth, tapping there as if to draw the words out. Picard recognised the motion because his

mother used to do the same when she wanted to say something that was too big for words, and once again Anna's resemblance to his mother struck him to his core.

The uncomfortable silence persisted for some time until Anna finally found enough composure to quietly say, "There's a warning buoy. In orbit, around the planet. A buoy. It's transmitting outwards and I guess...it seems like the storms prevented me from ever picking up its transmission on the surface."

Her whole body shuddered, and Picard felt a shudder pass through him as well as he realised what she'd just discovered. "Oh hell," he whispered.

"The buoy says this planet is too dangerous to risk transportation to the surface either by transporter or shuttle because of the storms. It says that there is a crash site but that...." she trailed off into bitter laughter, followed by a futile attempt to suppress tears. "It says there's nothing of value worth the risk, and advises that all Federation vessels should ignore the 'derelict legacy distress call'." She held her arms out to the sides and added, "That's me, I guess: a derelict of no value!"

With that, she collapsed forward into sobs, her head in her hands. Picard felt a lump in his throat but sat rigidly still, as if enduring a well-deserved upbraiding from a senior officer.

She sat up partially and through her ragged sobs said, "I'm so stupid. I should have remembered nobody ever wanted me, so of course they'd make sure nobody else ever could."

Anna closed her eyes and slumped to the side. Her despair was palpable, and it shamed Picard: not just as her potential father, but as a Starfleet captain. When she opened her eyes again and looked directly into the imager, he knew that any officer who saw this would feel justifiably accused by her sad glare.

"I've been used to not being wanted my whole life," she stated coldly. "I learned to get by anyway. But what I didn't realise..." She drew in a ragged breath to stave off more tears and then angrily continued, "It's one thing to be passively unwanted and quite another to find out you have actively, aggressively, cold-

heartedly been discarded as dangerous trash. That's what this buoy says, that nobody and nothing down there is worth the risk."

She sniffled and shook her head again. "All this time this computer has taught me about the Federation and Starfleet and gone on and on about bravery and heroism and boldly exploring the galaxy, but it's all lies," she sneered. "Makes me wonder what else is a lie? Should I even be trying so hard to get back to Earth? Earth doesn't want me so why am I risking so much to get back? To what? To who? Does anyone anywhere even care?"

Suddenly she lurched forward and stopped the log.

Picard sat motionless for a moment, her words ringing in his ears. As much as he knew the institutions he so valued were not lies, he understood how hollow it all must have looked to Anna in that moment, how lonely she must have felt on top of everything else she'd endured.

He turned his head and scratched at the back of his neck, but then noted that there were two more short logs in quick succession following that one, so he braced for impact and called up the next one.

"I don't know what to do now," she said, once more staring into the space beside the imager. She softly sang, "*Where do I go from here? This isn't where I expected to be. You had it all, I believed in me, I believed in you.*"

She wiped tears away and said, "I've always felt so small and meek, but now I wonder if I'm the brave one. Maybe I'm too good for the Federation. Maybe they don't deserve to get me back. Maybe if I'm invisible garbage, I should see if I can be someone else's treasure. Klingon space is really close. Would they want me more? I don't know. I really don't. I don't know anything anymore."

With that, she ended the log again.

Picard was also uncertain what the Klingons would have done with her if she'd gone to them. The treaty was in place by then, of course, so most likely they'd have been amused at her unusual story and then handed her back to the Federation. *She might've*

escaped being taken aboard Loxos' stolen ship, at least, he thought. But he knew it was pointless to wonder, because the fact was she did attempt to get back to Earth in the end and Loxos did abduct her and harm her further. It's a wonder she trusts anyone in Starfleet anymore at all.

With a resolute sigh he called up the next log.

This time her arms were crossed defiantly. "I checked some options and I don't know if it's safe to go anywhere other than Earth," she grumbled. "My information is all decades out of date. For all I know, we're at war with the Klingons again. For all I know, Earth's not even there anymore. I could put in at a colony or starbase along the way, I guess, but..." She shrugged widely, then re-crossed her arms. "I don't know what's safe or who to trust. How am I supposed to know? I waited all my life to be rescued and now I find out nobody was ever going to try.

"I don't understand what's wrong with Starfleet. You're all terrible people. Awful, cruel, horrible monsters. And cowards, the lot of you," she spat. "You all left me to rot alone because you were too scared to even try to get me and I hate you all for it. I could never do what you've done. I swear I will never, ever let any child suffer like you all let me suffer. I'd rather die trying to help them than live a coward who abandons five year olds to die!"

She thinks we knew she was there. She has no idea that nobody knew, he thought. Then again, why didn't anybody ever ask what happened to Meredith's child when she went off on assignment? Anna's wrong that Starfleet wilfully leaves children to die, but she's correct that Earth and the Federation failed her; all of us, myself especially.

Anna continued, "I thought maybe I should just fly around and find other kids that need help. But I don't even know where to start. You're Starfleet. You're huge and have all these ships and information and you can't even bother helping one kid. I have only this," she said, gesticulating around herself to her patched-up wreck. "I'm willing to go all over the galaxy to help people with just this if I can. I'd save everyone if I could, but I'm one person

with a barely-held together ship. I can't exactly go system to system seeing if anybody needs help. I need help! And I don't even know where to get it anymore!"

She bellowed out a raging roar, shaking her fists before her; a primal, visceral sound that trailed off into a low growl directed once more to the imager.

I stand corrected, Picard thought, eyes wide. *The Klingons would have adopted you outright and seen much honour in your fury.*

Somehow her wild sound transformed into a song, one Picard recognised as usually sung sadly but Anna belted it out as a full-on accusation. "*Cellophane!*" she cried out. "*Missus Cellophane shoulda been my name, Missus Cellophane! 'Cause you can look right through me, fly right by me and never even know I'm there!*" As in previous logs, she held the last note ridiculously long, only this time it turned back into a feral, animalistic sound again at the end. The juxtaposed blend of the refined culture of classic musical theatre and her unbridled anger was both captivating and overwhelming.

But Anna did not so much as blink as she came down from her rage, still glaring directly into the camera, directly into the viewers' souls. "All this time I wondered what's wrong with me, but now I see the real question is: what's wrong with you?"

Picard shuddered again, this time unable to minimise it at all.

Something in her expression shifted and carried her entire posture with it. In a single breath she went from ferocious wild-child bent over with hackles raised, to the upright, straight posture of ancient royalty, her countenance cold and unyielding, proud and more certain of herself than she'd been in any of her logs before. Picard found himself sitting up straighter in response, once again as if he was in the presence of a superior officer or higher still: a galactic dignitary with immense power.

"Well," she said in an icy tone. "I'm going to show you. All of you. I'm going to show everyone what they were willing to throw away. Or die trying."

With that, she ended the recording, and that was it for that stardate's logs.

Picard sat staring at his terminal's screen for some time, once more exhausted by Anna's logs, but this time acutely irritated that she didn't know that her abandonment wasn't deliberate. While his own ignorance of her existence felt like a paltry excuse, her loathing of Starfleet and the Federation needled him in a way that compelled him to tell her in person that all of it had been a tragic series of mistakes, never malice or cowardice. He didn't blame her for not knowing, and he knew from Deanna's briefing that Anna had since been told of the errors, but he could not shake the need to go to her and explain it all himself.

"Computer," he demanded, "location of Specialist Anna White."

"*Specialist Anna White is currently in main engineering,*" the computer replied.

"Right then," he said. He abruptly stood, adjusted his uniform, and strode out of his quarters to the nearest turbolift. "Main engineering," he demanded, and the turbolift began to take him there.

But as it hurtled through the ship, his resolve dissipated. He recalled Deanna's warning that when he met Anna, he'd have one shot to get it right or risk frightening her away forever.

"Halt turbolift," he ordered, and the car complied, coming to a quick but smooth stop somewhere in the upper drive section, he guessed.

Picard sighed, recalling Deanna's other arguments for respecting Anna's boundaries for the time being. He groaned, rubbed at his forehead, and leaned back against the turbolift wall.

Am I about to confront her for her benefit or for my own? he asked himself. His gut clenched at the answer he didn't want to admit, but he knew there was no valid excuse for rushing at the poor young woman there in engineering in front of her coworkers, making a scene where she was voluntarily lending her expertise to the new drive installation.

After all that anger and loathing directed at Starfleet, here she is helping out anyway. If that isn't graciousness, I can't imagine what is.

He muttered, "Return to Deck Eight, starting position." The turbolift obeyed, carrying him back as he felt both relief and guilt, wondering if not going to her counted as continuing to abandon her in some way.

CHAPTER THREE

Stardate 47219.1 (Saturday 21/03/2370, 23:20) — Main Engineering

Anna let her hair tumble through her fingers, only becoming aware that she'd fiddled with her braid to the point of unraveling it when she felt the loose strands tickle the back of her hand. She grumbled at both her hair and the console before her, and then noticed to her surprise that the other braid was half undone as well. She had no memory of having undone it, but was used to discovering evidence of unconscious fidgeting while trying to work out a problem.

With a sigh, she stretched her arms over her head. "Well, I'm one and a half braids down, it seems," she said idly to Geordi behind her. "This point-six per cent discrepancy between the spec and the starboard PTC joint readout at junction fifty-six isn't getting solved tonight."

"Don't worry about it," Geordi said tiredly. "It's well below threshold and there's a team going over it tomorrow in first shift." Then he added with a chuckle, "But yeah, I noticed half an hour ago you were playing with your hair while you tried to figure it all out."

Anna sheepishly admitted, "I've managed to not do it down here before...I think? Sometimes I go up and down each side undoing it and then doing it back up again, but usually once I notice it's loose I know I've been diving into a problem too deep." She sang in her own mind, *Dive down deep into her sound, but not too far or you'll be drowned*. Then she said aloud, "I have to remind myself that I'm a biological unit who needs food and water and other calls of nature."

Geordi chuckled again. "Yeah. Sometimes I'm jealous of how Data can keep going and going when the rest of us have to rest."

“I haven’t seen him at all since the cybernetics lab. He’s okay, right?” Anna asked tentatively.

“Yeah, he’s fine. Just busy, because the downside to never needing rest is always having something to do, I guess. He’ll probably be down here later tonight unless he’s got bridge duty again. Sometimes he pulls triple shifts, but he seems happy with it. As much as he’ll ever admit to happiness.”

Anna smiled. “I’m not convinced of that alleged zero value.”

“Nobody who knows him is. Then again, maybe we’re just projecting our feelings onto him.”

Anna popped her leg back on under the desk. “Well I’m going to project myself up to my quarters. I might come back in a few hours if you don’t object.”

“Of course I don’t object. But you are allowed to rest, you know. In fact, you should. Often.”

“I know. I very much appreciate the way you’ve been letting me come and go on my own terms. Thank you.”

“You are absolutely welcome,” he said, standing up and stretching his shoulders side to side. “I’m going over to the break room for some dinner. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Okay,” Anna replied as Geordi walked away. She turned back to her console to close up, but just as she was about to stand to leave she was startled to see Reg peering around the drive bay door at her.

There was a moment of awkward tension, during which Anna glanced around to see if anybody else was close by. There were a few folks still in the area, but none near enough for her comfort, prompting her to reflexively cringe away from Reg.

He nodded and said, “That’s...that’s pretty much what I thought. I made you uncomfortable.”

Anna wasn’t sure what to say, but decided quickly that lying would be a bad idea, if for no other reason than she was so bad at it, especially when rattled. She softly said, “Um...yeah. You did.”

“I’m sorry.”

Anna blinked at him, all of her rehearsed lines about his earlier rudeness failing to load in her head.

Reg stammered, “Sometimes...it can be hard for me to know what to say to...it’s just that I didn’t mean to scare you. I get weird sometimes.”

“So do I, I suppose,” she replied, trying to be friendly although unsure why she wanted to. *I’m supposed to be angry at him. This is so confusing.*

“Yeah, but you probably don’t scare people.”

“I kind of wish sometimes I could.”

Reg smirked. “No, you really don’t want to do that.”

Is he going to keep telling me what I think or understand? This isn’t much of an apology. Then again, I don’t want this to get worse. What do I do? What am I supposed to say to make this all just stop?

Reg squirmed a bit, and then shrugged. “I...I just want to...you know...be your...that is, to be friends.”

“I’d like that too,” she said, once again reflexively even though she wasn’t sure if it was accurate anymore. She always felt desperate to make people like her, but Reg was making it all difficult.

“Like you and Data are. How does he get to be friends so easily with you?”

Anna found the question unsettling but couldn’t put her finger on why, so she simply answered, “He makes me feel safe.”

Reg nodded. “Mmhm, mmhm. And I don’t.”

Anna cringed further. *Why does that sound like an accusation of me instead of admitting something about himself? Am I supposed to teach him how to stop spooking me like this? Why is that my job? He’s an adult who benefitted from growing up in human society!*

Reg continued defensively, “He tells you jokes and I tried to tell you a joke but you didn’t get it.”

Anna shook her head in frustration. “Data tells me jokes he knows I’ll like. He asks me what interests me and then helps me

find that. He makes me feel heard. You told me a joke that I didn't even recognise as a joke and then got upset with me for that. You're clearly still upset. I actually do want to be your friend. I keep trying, but you keep getting angry and I don't know what to do about that, but angry human men scare me. I'm no expert on friendship but I'm pretty sure it's not getting angry at someone who's trying to be nice."

"You got angry at me earlier."

That really set her off; suddenly she found she could recall her rehearsed reprisals. "You weren't being nice!" she fired back. "I tried to get you to explain the joke to me and you insulted me instead and then said women have it easy and you also blamed me for not having read books during my isolation that I couldn't possibly have access to!" She pointed to the upper deck. "I stand up there sometimes and watch you down here and try to think of ways to be nice to you so you won't glower all the time, but then I talk to you and you keep glowering!"

Reg suddenly looked shocked. "You...you do what? You watch me and think about trying to be nice to me?"

Anna cringed back further, desperately hoping someone would notice this unpleasant conversation and intercede, but the few people around seemed engrossed in their tasks. "Yeah?" she carefully admitted. "Is that wrong? I didn't know that's wrong," she said trying to avoid crying, overwhelmed by too many emotions piling on her and the discomfort of the entire encounter.

"It's not wrong," Reg said. "It's...it's just...nobody's ever really thought about me like that before."

"Well...maybe they are and you just don't know."

Reg considered this for a moment, and then said, "I suppose...that's...possible?"

Sensing that she might've turned the tide, Anna tried once more to offer an olive branch, desperate to make it all okay. "Reg, I really do want to be friends. But you have to stop acting like everything I do is failing you somehow. You need to be nice back."

Reg crossed his arms, muttered something under his breath, then uncrossed his arms, put his hands on his hips, started to say something but stopped, crossed his arms again, then uncrossed them once more, and then finally, haltingly replied, “Okay. What do you...like?”

Anna was briefly confused by the question, but then guessed he was referring back to her example of how Data is friendly. “Um, I like...building things and fixing things, and listening to music when I do it.”

In a newly softened tone, Reg replied, “I like fixing things too. And some music, sometimes.”

Anna nodded and put on a little smile. “Okay.”

“Do you like to...read books?” he asked tentatively.

“Um, I actually find reading text very difficult, but I like to listen to books.”

Obvious disapproval crossed his features, but he put on a smile of his own as he said, “That’s...a perfectly...acceptable way to...um...get a story, I guess.”

“Well, like I said, if you want to tell me the stories you’ve read about, I’m happy to listen.”

“I’d really like...that would be...that’d be nice. Maybe the next time we’re fixing things in the same...you know...place.”

Anna nodded again, eager to end the conversation on the positive note. “Okay. Thank you, Reg. I look forward to that.”

“As do I,” he said. Then he abruptly turned and walked out of engineering.

Anna sat there confused again, but relieved he was gone. After a moment she realised her exhaustion was further compounded by all of it, so she rushed upstairs before anyone else could talk to her.



Anna opened her eyes to find herself surrounded by bright, white light, and immediately knew she was dreaming. While she did indeed keep her quarters' lights on while she slept, they were never this bright; nowhere indoors that she'd ever been was, and she was used to this sort of strange beginning to nightmares. She braced herself as much as possible against what might happen next. She'd learned some level of skill in altering dreams lately, as long as they weren't full-blown, terrorising nightmares. Once terror gripped her, she never stood a chance.

Thus she mustered as much inner serenity as she could to calmly inspect her surroundings. She was dressed in her usual daytime attire in whatever this weird little white room was. It wasn't even big enough to hold any furniture, and the only exit led to a long, straight corridor that filled her with dread.

The corridor was Galaxy class style, but far too long and straight without side branches to be anywhere on board the Enterprise. The lights along it were flickering, providing shadowy cover for moving figures the whole way along. Somehow she knew they were all human men; creepy ones, nobody kind or trustworthy amongst them.

Anna peered through the darkness, trying to make sense of it so she could control her fear. Some familiar faces passed in and out of the shadows: she saw Commander Riker with the same awful grin he'd had at Geordi's birthday party in Ten Forward when she'd only just arrived on the Enterprise. She saw another man pass from one shadow to another while sneering at her and recognised him as Erik Tiedemann, a Daystrom researcher who had come onto her on her first day at that facility, thus turning it into her last day there as well.

Though she could not see Robert Loxos, she knew he was there, hiding amongst the other moving shapes. She could sense his presence, feel his eyes upon her, and she heard him whisper, "Don't worry, you'll learn to like it."

Anna shuddered so hard within the dream that she felt it through to her reality, her heart pounding so much that she nearly woke, but exhaustion kept her trapped in the dream.

But it is only a dream, she reminded herself firmly. *It's not going to become a nightmare. I won't let them get me. I won't let them win.*

She rose to her tiptoes to see beyond the shadows in the corridor. In the distance, she could just make out another white room like the one she was in, only it seemed bigger and had consoles in it, like an overly-lit slice of main engineering. With sudden relief she realised Data was there, tapping on a console.

If I can get to him, I'll be safe. He won't let these others grab me or hurt me in any way, I know it.

But as soon as she set a foot into the corridor, the men in the shadows began to laugh and reach towards her. She retreated into the small room and looked around for something to use as a weapon, but there was nothing loose to pick up. She inspected the walls to see if she could somehow climb up and use the ceiling of the corridor to get to Data, but there were no grip points and she could feel that her hands were too sweaty with fear anyway.

Once again she stood on her toes to see Data and to attempt to call to him, but as was often the case in her dreams and nightmares, she could not make herself speak beyond a breathless whisper.

Feeling fear starting to overwhelm her, she looked away from the corridor to regain focus and control. *It's just a dream. I can do anything I want here. I can make this space be what I need it to be.*

With that in mind, she willed up a control panel in the wall of the little white room. She couldn't read any words or numbers on it — another usual feature of her dreams — but she decided on a series of buttons to push that would release the corridor's gravity controls for her and her alone. She was fully aware that there was no way to actually do that using any Federation gravity technology she knew of, but she decided in her dream that it would work, so it did.

Like the dreams where I can take long, nearly-flying leaps, only this time I don't have to touch down until I get to Data on the other side, she told herself as she began to float upwards.

She pushed herself forward out of the little white room and then scrambled along the corridor's ceiling as fast as she could. The horrible men below reached for her, some even managing to touch her fleetingly, but she gritted her teeth and refused to let their nasty fingers gain purchase.

Finally, she landed on the other side and dropped herself into the room there, right beside Data.

He turned to her, blinked in mild surprise, and said, "Hello. I am working to solve the discrepancy between the starboard PTC joint readout at junction fifty-six versus the specification document. Would you like to assist me?"

Anna nodded, still unable to speak, but much happier at this turn in the dream.

Data pointed to his console, and while she still couldn't read text while dreaming, something about the arrangement of the information on her screen made sense, like all of of the pins in an old mechanical tumbler lock finally lining up properly to let the key turn.

Anna woke and sat up in bed, panting, but because she knew she'd been dreaming she was able to cling to the image of Data's console in her mind and shove all of the scary parts to the side. Quickly, she got up, hoisted herself through her quarters to the head, showered, put on her leg, and got dressed all while muttering to herself repeatedly to recite the important parts of the memory.

She slid down the bars of the vertical Jefferies tube to hurry into main engineering and back to her regular console. Only as she was logging in did she remember to check who was around; with a sigh of relief she noted that Reg wasn't there, nor Dean, nor anybody else who stressed her.

In less than a minute she brought up her earlier work, tapped in her dreamed solution, and then sat back with an enormous smile to

see that it worked. She clapped quietly to herself, then put her hands to her face and wiggled side to side in giddy triumph.

This is what I live for, she thought. *Solving problems is the best feeling I know, especially when...* She cut off her own thought, but then admitted to herself, *Especially when Data is part of it in any way.*

But that realisation prompted her to once again recall her conversation with Reg and his apparent jealousy that she liked being around Data. Anna still couldn't figure out why Reg's questions bothered her or why she increasingly felt uncomfortable around him. He hadn't done anything specifically creepy that she could identify. She didn't recall him being one of the threatening men in the corridor of her dream, but then again, she hadn't seen all their faces.

She felt guilty, in part because she didn't trust herself to accurately gauge these sorts of social interactions. She wasn't sure if she was being oversensitive or if she was just getting good at detecting problematic men, having encountered so many of them in her two-and-a-half years amongst other people. She was simultaneously terrified that she wasn't identifying enough of them but also judging them all too harshly.

Anna genuinely wanted to be friends with Reg. She genuinely wanted to hear more about these books he obviously loved so much. She felt a real pull in her heart to reach out to him as a fellow awkward outsider and make things better for both of them in doing so. But something in the way he had spoken to her recently was setting off alarms, enough now that she wasn't sure she would feel safe around him anymore without a trusted friend very close by. That made her feel awful and wonder if there was something fundamentally broken about her that rendered her unworthy of friendship.

She sighed, the elation of having solved the engineering problem entirely drowned in her social self-doubt.

This is too hard, she thought. *I need another engineering problem instead.*

With that, she pulled up the next task in the folder Geordi had cheekily labelled “You Probably Can’t Solve These But Feel Free To Try”. Anna raised an eyebrow as she read the problem, then chuckled softly and muttered, “Optimising deuterium calculations is easy-peasy compared to figuring out humans. I’ll have these done before first shift starts, Geordi.”



Stardate 47219.5 (Sunday 22/03/2370, 02:49) — Picard’s Quarters

Picard woke suddenly, annoyed before he could even discern what had woken him. *I heard something*, he thought, but couldn’t place what it was. He grumbled, turned over, and tried to sleep again, but then the noise returned: the distant wail of an extremely aggrieved infant.

He sat up, swinging his legs out of bed in profound irritation. *I am quite certain there are no infants in any of the rooms on this side of this deck. Who the hell is walking one around the corridors at this time of night?*

He tugged his open-chested pyjama top tighter around himself and went to his door, determined to glare at anyone out there. But then he paused and sighed, recalling that no parent trying to deal with a caterwauling baby deserved his scorn.

Picard rubbed his forehead, remembering his own late nights holding Meribor and Batai when they were each small and the helplessness that went with that. As the distant cries continued, he realised that’s what always bothered him so much about this particular sort of noise: it was the cry of abject suffering and desperation that ought to be alleviated with simple acts of care, so when it lingered it felt indicative of failure and that sense of dereliction of duty rankled him to his core. It didn’t matter that in his time as a parent — even if only an imaginary one — he had

tried everything; the unsolvable problem always struck him as an insult to sensibility and order.

There's no order to infants. That's their real problem, he thought grumpily, knowing full well it was an unfair judgement.

He considered going back to bed, but as he turned the distant cry suddenly sounded both closer and more desperate. *That's not mere colic,* he thought as the wail became increasingly a shriek of agony. *That child is being harmed!*

Picard went towards his door once more but when it opened he gasped, for beyond it was not the expected corridor but a wide, sunny field of wind-tossed, golden grass. When he turned to look behind, his quarters were gone. Peering through the sudden sunlight, he came to recognise the meadow behind his family home in France.

“What the hell?” he asked aloud, followed by an angry shout of, “Q?! Is this your foolishness? I demand you put an end to it at once!”

But there was no answer save for the return of the infant's cry, this time coming from the wooded area to the southwest.

“Who's there?” he shouted towards the trees. “Whose infant is that? Why is nobody helping that child?”

Angry, confused, and too tired to put up with such nonsense, he strode towards the trees but as soon as he passed into their shadow the scene around him changed again, disorienting him for a moment. The soft, grassy ground gave way to hard metal grating, and the trees closed in as metal walls with green lighting, their branches turning into varied cables and conduits all around.

Picard's breath caught in his chest, his heart pounding, his hands beginning to shake as he realised where he was. He closed his fists defiantly, defensively, though he knew there was no self-defence to be had here.

The infant's desperate cries continued, ahead and to his left.

He stepped tentatively forward towards the junction — precisely, terrifyingly square in all its angles — and slowly turned towards the sound of the cry, afraid to look but knowing he had no

choice in the matter, as there was no choice to be had in this place any more than there was self-defence.

About ten metres down the corridor there stood a figure holding a naked, squalling infant, the latter flush with fury from her tiny head to her tiny, shaking fists and tiny, kicking feet. She looked pinker still for the juxtaposition of the grey flesh of the man who held her before him, offering her forward to Picard with an icy countenance.

A thousand words came into Picard's head, but he could speak none of them, not now, not to this person...this thing before him. *That is not me*, he thought. *That is not my face. That is Locutus, but that is not me. I am Jean-Luc Picard, Captain of the Enterprise, and this is a nightmare. I am human. I am not Borg. This isn't real.*

But try as he might, he could not wake himself. Instead, he found himself walking towards Locutus and the wailing child, wondering if he needed to rescue her, perhaps to somehow rescue himself through her. *Is that supposed to be Anna? Meribor? Someone else?*

The closer he got, the more he realised it didn't matter. He was compelled to take her, to console her, to save her and protect her from whatever else this nightmare would bring.

When he came to stand before Locutus he reached out to take the child, but as he touched her she burst into a cascade of pink and yellow dust that fell through his hands and Locutus' spinning prosthetic claw.

Derisive laughter came from behind him. He turned to see the Borg Queen there, her black, mocking eyes sparkling with green reflections above her vicious grin.

"You're too late," she taunted. "You are always too late for everything that matters."

Rage and terror welled up in him as he tried to shout her down, but the intake of breath finally woke him. He found himself in his bed, gasping deeply, gripping the sheets and covered in sweat. He sat up to catch his breath and compose himself, then quickly stood

and went to the door. When it opened, he saw Deck Eight outside as normal, with nobody nearby.

Picard stood there a moment, straining to hear if there were any babies crying, but all he heard was the regular, comforting hum of the ship all around.

He turned and went back to sit on the edge of his bed, still shaken by the experience, still uncertain if he really was awake but unable to think of any convincing test of reality. He pinched his thigh, but the gesture felt silly because he had no doubt of his mind's capacity to include that in a dream as well.

He sat there awhile, comparing all of his real-world stressors and lingering guilt to the images and events of the nightmare, wondering if his unconscious was trying to tell him something. But he was too tired to make sense of it, so when he felt his eyes drooping he popped into the head to relieve himself, washed his hands and face, and then returned the bed to try to sleep some more.

CHAPTER FOUR

Stardate 47219.9 (Sunday 22/03/2370, 06:40) — Main Engineering

When Commander Riker arrived on the bridge early, Data took the opportunity to attempt to connect with Anna — whom he knew had been in main engineering for several hours — before the bustle of day shift began at 0700.

As soon as he rounded the corner into engineering, he saw her at the central console. She looked up at him and burst into one of her bright smiles that he had come to categorise as “compelling”. He could not discern what it was about them that was compelling, nor precisely what he was compelled to do other to elicit more of them.

“Hi,” she said cheerily.

“Hello,” he replied. “I apologise for not having spoken with you since our activities with the Raman. I have been concerned for your emotional state.”

“Oh, I’m all right now, I think. I’ve been busy with all of this, and talking to Geordi about his mom for a good long time helped us both. Are you okay?” she asked as her smile faded.

“Yes, thank you. It is good that several of us have been supporting Geordi. He is my best friend, and I have been concerned about his emotional state as well.”

“It seems like right now everyone’s emotional state is tied up in getting ready for the new drive.”

“Perhaps, but it is likely he is using work to cover his grief. I have observed that humans are quite prone to doing so.”

Anna nodded. “I definitely bury my yucky feelings in work. A lot. Sometimes making or fixing stuff is all that gets me through hard times.” Then she added with a shrug, “Although other times watching my favourite old movies does the trick.”

“It is good that you have multiple coping strategies,” Data said, attempting to replicate what he imagined Counselor Troi might say.

“It seems so,” she said, pointing to the section of the central console she was standing beside. “I’ve been using deuterium optimisation calculations to cover my stress for the past few hours, and since I’ve solved some problems and not thought about scary things, I’ll call that a success.”

Data nodded and came around to view her screen, only then observing that she was standing on one leg. His brow furrowed in renewed concern.

Anna noticed, laughed a little, and pointed towards her usual chair behind Geordi’s; her artificial leg was sitting across the seat.

“Hm,” Data said, his brow going back up. “Are you stable and comfortable like that? I could easily bring another chair for you if you wish to sit at this location.”

“I’m fine, Data, thank you. I could’ve wheeled that one over here. I’m actually used to standing like this, but I don’t often let others see because people get kind of...weird about it.”

“I hope I have not just been...weird.”

“No, I mean like Dean was that first day, telling me to get a bio-leg, quizzing me why I haven’t, all that awkward and annoying stuff. Or sometimes people act like it’s somehow...I don’t know...disgusting or something? Anyway, hardly anyone’s been in here all night and those who are around haven’t shown any signs of even noticing that I took it off. They’re so focused,” she said, nodding towards two engineers bustling through from the drive bay to the exit.

Data nodded.

Anna shrugged again and explained, “It gets irritating if I wear it too long. I’m honestly still getting used to having it on so often. Hardly ever wore it on Earth unless Dr. Cortez was making me go somewhere.”

“I see,” he replied. “While it is unfortunate that certain individuals have been less than supportive, I believe you find that most of the engineering staff will wish to optimise your comfort.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But I’ll probably pop it back on before shift change just so I don’t have to worry about it.”

Data nodded again and looked at her console. “Ah! I see you have come up with several interesting solutions here.”

“Hopefully. It all still requires review, but I’m pretty confident about it all.”

“A cursory examination appears to confirm your findings. Geordi will be particularly interested in this one,” he said, pointing to one of the readouts. “I suggested something similar but had not considered folding in the Sharma-Munoz tables. It is an intriguing concept that is likely to overcome some of the discrepancies of our earlier attempts.”

“Well it seems that’s my special magic, mashing up weird things until something that works falls out. Here, look at this one,” she said, switching to a different readout. “Sharma-Munoz wouldn’t work here, of course, and I tried a few other things, but what I think might work is — Data, what are you doing?”

Data looked down at his legs, then hers, then back at her eyes to reply, “I am attempting to stand on one leg as you are while also reading your experimental readouts.”

Anna laughed. “Why?”

“To share in your experience.”

“That’s endlessly sweet of you, but don’t fall over! You two-legged types often find it trickier than I make it look. I’m used to it. You’re not.”

“I am not at risk of falling,” he assured her. “My balancing servos are adjusting quickly. I am confident I could stand like this indefinitely if required.”

Anna raised an eyebrow and grinned mischievously. “Oh? But can you do this?” She hopped around behind him and across the room without so much as a wobble.

“Hm,” Data said with a curious expression, and then immediately replicated her movements.

With a little snort and laugh, Anna set off again, hopping deftly all the way around the central console. Data followed in kind,

which prompted her to laugh more, which in turn prompted him to keep going even after she had stopped.

She applauded his effort as he came around to stand before her, still on one leg.

Anna put her hands on her hips. “Okay, but how fast can you go?”

“I do not know. I have never timed myself in this manner.”

“Wanna race?” she asked, the mischievous grin back in full force.

As much as he did not like refuting her mirthful request, he was compelled to answer, “Geordi would not approve of racing in main engineering.”

“No, not in here! I mean out in the far port corridor. It’s long and straight-ish enough for a race.”

Data considered it, and then said, “I accept this challenge.”

“Do you two need a referee?” Ensign Kevin Wong said from the drive bay.

Anna laughed again as she hopped over to the chair to pick up her leg and sling it over her shoulder. “If by that you’re asking if you can come watch, then just come watch!”

The young Ensign looked to Data, who replied, “As long as we are brief about it and not interrupting anybody’s work, I do not object to anyone watching.”

“We’re almost at shift change anyway,” Anna said. “Come on!”

“Race happening!” Wong called into the drive bay, which quickly resulted in several other night shift engineers gleefully following Data and Anna to the long port corridor of Deck Thirty-Six at the aft end of the section that sported seven escape pod hatches.

As she hopped through, Anna giggled and sang, “*For Anna White I’ll bite, I hear her foot’s all right, of course it all depends if it rained last night!*” Once there, Anna set her leg to the side, exclaimed, “*Can do! Can do!*” giggled again, stood in the middle of the junction, pointed down the corridor, and suggested, “How about we go the length of the escape pods to start?”

Data nodded amiably, and then bent over to grasp his right leg just below the knee. “For an accurate assessment, I should attempt to match your configuration more closely.” With a sharp turn of his hands, he disconnected the joint and slid his own shin and foot out of his pant leg, setting it beside Anna’s.

Anna laughed and clapped her hands, although the others gathered clearly weren’t sure how to react to any of it. However, as soon as the races began, the engineers fell into their usual habits of loudly cheering and hypothesising relative odds at each other.



Stardate 47220.0 (Sunday 22/03/2370, 07:00) — Deck Thirty-Six

Geordi emerged from the turbolift outside main engineering as usual, but before he could go inside he heard a cacophony of raucous cheering to the port. He turned and headed that direction instead, finding a small crowd of engineers gathered in great enjoyment of something further down the corridor.

Aisling turned as he approached and lifted her hands in placation. “It’s okay, boss, don’t panic. Harmless racing. Totally safe, more or less, comparatively speaking.”

“Not with the whiteslides again?” Geordi asked, ready to cringe at that recent trend he’d been trying to abolish before someone got hurt.

“Nope, just regular hopping. Sort of. Come see, it really is okay.” She took his arm and whispered, “Good stress relief for all, and actually really sweet. You’ll love this.”

The others parted to let Geordi through as Anna called out, “I won again!”

Data replied, “You are indeed very skilled at moving in this manner.”

“You’re not letting me win, are you?”

“No. However, my programming is adjusting to the new parameters. I expect in two to three more races, I will overtake you.”

“Oh it is on!” Anna said with another laugh. “This time back and forth to this spot!”

“Agreed,” Data said.

“What the hell?” Geordi asked as the group counted down from three around him.

“One-legged racing,” Lieutenant David Sorenson replied. “Anna keeps winning, for now.”

“Go!” shouted the crowd in unison, and the two were off again.

Geordi shook his head and mildly sighed. “That’s really...you know, I was going to say it’s weird but then I realized around here, with these two, no it isn’t.”

As Data had predicted, Anna won that next race, but only just barely as she was more skilled at the turnaround than Data was. But also as predicted, Data won after that.

Anna leaned on the corridor wall to catch her breath.

Data said, “I believe I have now optimised my control and am likely to continue to win. However, your speed and skill is clearly outside normal two-legged human parameters, which I believe was your initial point.”

Anna cheerfully stuck out her right hand, which Data took and shook in sporting style.

The other engineers applauded appreciatively, but then quickly dispersed with the shift change, especially with Geordi standing there eyeing them all with only a slightly indulgent grin. He crossed his arms and shook his head slowly at Anna and Data.

Anna finally noticed him there and looked immediately concerned. “Oh! You’re not angry, are you?”

Geordi laughed. “No. I’m actually impressed at how fast you are.” He turned to Data to add, “I’d expect you to be fast, but...” He whistled in awe. “Anna, you weren’t kidding when you said you’re better without the artificial leg.”

Anna leaned back against the wall once more as Data handed her her leg and began putting his own back in place. “I am, but it’s tiring,” she said as she reassembled herself in kind. “I still don’t love the horizontal. Hey Data?”

“Yes?” he replied as he stood upon two legs once more.

“Some time soon we need a rope climbing race.”

“That is something I have practiced before and am likely to win outright.”

With a cheeky grin, Anna teased, “Yeah but you’ve never raced me. You might win, but I’ll give you a run for your money.”

Data’s brow furrowed. “I do not have any tangible currency at this time.”

Both Anna and Geordi laughed, and then Data caught on and smiled with them.

Anna stepped awkwardly away from the wall, as if returning to two legs was more trouble than one, but then regained her step and said, “Anyway, Geordi, come look at the calculations I was showing Data when all this silly stuff started. I think you’ll like what I’ve got.”



As Ensign Wong departed the group to return to main engineering, he caught sight of Lieutenant Covett glaring at the scene from one of the adjoining labs. Covett saw Wong as well, and disappeared back into the lab.

Wong looked inside as he passed, and Covett moved his head in a motion directing the young Ensign to enter. The door slid closed behind him.

“What the fuck was all that about?” Covett growled. “Some of us are trying to get work done around here.”

Wong laughed nervously. When he’d first come aboard, Covett had taken him under wing as a fellow colony kid from around the Cardassian edge of the Federation, so he felt a particular allegiance to him. In recent months, however, he had noted an increasing

bitterness about the Lieutenant that unnerved him. “It was just a bit of fun. Letting off steam. You know how it is.”

“You’d think they’d have forgotten that we’re less than a day out from Starbase 84 and there’s work to be done.”

“Uh, well, I think the sheer volume of the workload is why they needed to...chill a bit,” he said carefully. “She’s been working all night in main. Anna, that is.”

“Working. That’s what we’re calling La Forge’s little sandbox for her now? Working? That puffed-up brat doesn’t know what work is.”

Like everyone on board, Wong knew about Anna’s general history, and to his estimation spending your entire childhood trying to fix up a ship by yourself definitely counted as work. But he knew better than to argue the point with Covett, who had clearly hated Anna since she got there.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Wong tentatively asked, “What’s up with her to you anyway? She’s no threat to you, to any of us.”

Covett wheeled around on Wong, making the younger man take a startled step back to nearly fall against the lab wall. “She’s a threat to the sensible order I swore to uphold that’s barely held together as it is!” he snapped.

“What?” Wong squeaked. “How?”

Covett snarled, “She comes here to the flagship, making tons of diva demands and then gets all high and mighty about the things she pretends to know everything about and we’re all expected to bow and grovel just because what, she had a tragic youth? Her childhood was a hell of a lot easier than mine or yours or any of us outer colony kids!”

To Wong, there was deference to a trusted senior ally, and then there was basic logic, and a violation of the latter created a gap in the former. “Uh, no?” he said incredulously. “I mean sure, life on Salva Two had challenges but I had parents and a loving home, and a great village full of wonderful people.”

“Yeah? But did you have your own replicators and a warp drive to play with?”

Wong understood where Covett was going with this, because the Lieutenant often vented about how easy some Federation folks had had it growing up versus how tough life on the outer colonies had been. Usually they agreed, but in terms of this comparison, Wong wasn't having it. He moved out of Covett's glare, straightened his uniform, and said firmly, “No, but again, I had parents. And we did have a town replicator.”

“Parents are overrated,” Covett sneered. “I'd have been happier without my ass of a father around, trust me. And our settlement didn't get a replicator until I was 15. I had to get water to our house from the shared well in our circle twice a day from as soon as I was big enough to pull the cart. I didn't have a computer for a teacher letting me play ‘budding engineer’ my whole childhood. I had to help in the fields and all over town. We all did. I had to put in extra time to study for the academy entrance exam and then bust ass all through that education and put in the hours to get my promotion to Lieutenant. But this little girl hops in on one leg with a sad orphan story and some major technical protocol violations and everyone thinks she's a genius.”

Because she is a genius, and you just don't like that she's smarter than you, Wong thought but didn't dare say. More diplomatically, he tried to talk Covett down by saying, “I feel like we all had it rough in different ways. What matters is we're all here together trying to make better for everyone.”

Covett scoffed, but finally backed off and returned to the desk he'd been working at before the race had gotten loud enough to draw him out of this lab where La Forge had sent him after heckling Anna one too many times. As he sat down he said, “Yeah, kid, that's because you're still huffed up on Starfleet Academy fumes. But soon enough you'll see how the shine wears off. At the end of the day, you and I are still expendable colonists, while she's still an Earth-born.”

“I don't think that matters to anyone anymore,” Wong replied.

“You keep telling yourself that, kid. It’s a nice daydream. Now get out of here and back to wherever you’re supposed to be. I have things to do.”

Wong resisted the urge to sigh and instead took the excuse to escape back to main engineering.



Stardate 47220.3 (Sunday 22/03/2370, 09:49) — Bridge

Picard sat in his chair, his left leg crossed over his right as usual, his chin resting in his left hand as he idly skimmed status reports on the built-in screen on the right armrest. Riker was reading through the reports on his own screen beside him; they occasionally muttered to each other in agreement about the contents. Otherwise, there was little conversation on the bridge that morning while the Enterprise cruised towards Starbase 84.

Troi came in and took her seat, also crossing her legs as usual, her hands clasped before her expectantly.

“Good morning,” Riker said pleasantly, although not looking up from his screen.

“Good morning,” Troi replied. “And to you, Captain.”

Picard nodded in reply, but also shifted his hand slightly so that he was nearly hiding behind his fingers. *As if that would work*, he chastised himself, and then moved his hand to look at her with a tired, grim little smile. *She can tell my mood. Why do I even bother to pretend she can't?*

Troi gave him a very sympathetic smile in return, and tilted her head ever so slightly towards the ready room.

Resistance is futile indeed, he thought, Borg voices still ringing in his head from his nightmare. He chastised himself again, knowing it was completely unfair to liken Troi’s unspoken offer of support to Borg intrusion. He gave her a nearly imperceptible

apologetic shrug, then a tiny nod, and the two rose without a word to go into the ready room.

As they both sat on his couch, she said, “I can feel how much this...issue is weighing upon you. Are you getting enough sleep?”

“A passable amount.”

“Nightmares?”

He didn’t like telling her about his nightmares, and they both knew it. He shot her a look to indicate he didn’t want to go down that path, but also nodded a confirmation.

“Okay,” she said gently. “You’ve been watching Anna’s logs?”

He nodded again, crossing his arms tightly.

“How far have you gotten?”

“Uh, well, I watched the first one where she shows off her ship, and then the next where she launched it.” As exhausting as both of those had been to view, he could not help but suddenly beam with pride for how well Anna had done in the second despite all of the risks and her entirely legitimate terror. He smiled widely and uncrossed his arms. “She’s magnificent.”

Troi smiled too. “She is.”

But then Picard’s smile faded into a grimace comprised of anguish and shame. “And then I watched the next set, where she discovered how we all failed her. Starfleet, that is.”

Troi nodded solemnly. “It stings, doesn’t it, when she throws around all of those accusations and condemnations? I’m sorry.”

“You did warn me the logs would be difficult to watch, that she gets quite angry at times.”

“Mmhm. She lashes out frequently, and it’s not always fair.”

“And yet, sometimes it is,” he admitted. “Even when it’s not fair, it’s understandable. I can’t help but admire how she draws on her pain to propel herself forward, almost as if to spite those of us that she imagines left her there.”

“She’s extraordinarily resilient. That’s why she survived so long.”

“It’s inspiring, really, watching her turn all of that pain into determination, or her fear into action. There is a captivating,

dramatic quality to her: a stage presence even in absence of a known audience. She draws you in and makes you feel it all with her, makes you want to be part of it even when it's awful."

"Mhmm. Sounds like someone else I know," Troi said with another gentle smile.

"Ah, well...yes, perhaps," he replied awkwardly, then deflected by shifting the focus. "Are we entirely certain she knows now about the errors that were made? That she was not deliberately abandoned and left for dead? You mentioned she'd been told, but I'm concerned she may not have had it fully explained."

"The team that tried to support her when she was released from The Institute attempted to explain that to her, but she wasn't particularly receptive to anything they had to say. She's been sent multiple messages from multiple people detailing all of that out, but it's unclear if she's even read any of those. Dr. Cortez indicated to one of my colleagues who helped me compile the case file that Anna probably knows now that her presence on the Baltimore wasn't known to Starfleet — that lifeform scanners would not have been set to look for a small and weakened child, especially through thermobaric interference — but nobody's certain to what degree Anna accepts all of this. Dr Cortez noted that it's not wise to bring any of it up with her. She'll shut down and go off to isolate herself again."

Picard sighed. "So...we shouldn't go down there to explain it," he said cagily.

"No, that would be inadvisable."

"I can't help but feel if we could get a message through, it'd be better for her in the long run to know she was not deliberately abandoned."

"If there was reason to risk that kind of communication, I'd be inclined to agree. But right now as far as I can tell from third-party reports, she's doing well. Geordi's keeping a professional eye on her, Aisling Navarro's taken her under wing, and she and Data have become very close friends already."

“Oh?” Picard found himself suddenly relieved to know that Data in particular might be looking out for Anna.

“He’s been gradually showing her around the ship late at night when she feels safe from the risk of running into command personnel.”

He nodded resolutely, wishing that she wasn’t so afraid of him but pleased Data was involved. “I can’t think of any kinder, gentler friend she could have than Data.”

“Neither can I. She’s in good hands. I still believe she will — in time — seek you out when she feels safe and stable enough to do so. Let’s continue to be patient and see what the next few weeks bring. Geordi invited her to be part of this drive replacement and he’s hopeful she’ll stay on beyond that. I don’t think anybody including Anna herself knows what she’s planning once the drive’s up and running. If she does choose to stay, that’ll solidify my opinion that part of her wants to be where you are, even if she doesn’t know it yet herself. Beyond that, I suspect it will still take some time plus the right catalyst for her to finally peek beyond her defensive walls to consider confronting you.”

Picard sighed and nodded.

Troi added, “I know that frustrates you, but that semblance of control is vital to establishing her trust. Besides,” she said with a little grin, “we can work to leak tidbits of other information and support to her as she forms these other relationships.”

“You mean make it clear through the back channels that my door is open to her?”

“Not quite that specific yet. More that there are many doors open and she retains control of which ones to explore on her own terms.”

“Oh. Yes. I see.”

“Captain, it is worth remembering that she appears to be thriving for the most part. She’s making friends, overcoming stage fright in engineering meetings, and learning that there’s value in social risk. Those are extremely positive steps for someone with her challenges, even if you and I don’t get to see it all ourselves.”

“I can’t help thinking that if she is truly my child, I’ve missed all her first steps as it is.”

“I know. But I still firmly believe you will get to have a relationship with her eventually, and that your patience now will make that stronger later.”

“Mm,” he said, then sheepishly admitted, “I almost went to her last night.”

“Oh, Captain.”

“After seeing that log where she was so upset, I got halfway down to engineering, fully intending to make things right, to explain it all to her. But then...well to be perfectly honest it was a combination of my own fear and recalling your warnings that held me back.”

Troi nodded sympathetically. “I’m glad you told me about that. That must have been a very difficult moment for you.”

He sighed again. “I hate feeling helpless and barred, even if it makes sense.”

“It’s good that you can name those feelings. I think we need to delve into that some more. In the meantime, if her logs are too much for you to bear alone — which is an entirely reasonable reaction — I can watch them with you.”

Picard considered this offer, but then replied, “No, I think I like being able to take it in at my own pace for now.”

“All right. But I would like us to have another session this week so we can talk about you and your side of things, including your own childhood and family structure.”

His usual walls about that subject snapped quickly into place, making him feel instantly defensive. “It’s going to be a very busy week.”

But Troi firmly said, “Then we’ll make time. This is potentially a major upheaval in your life, and it’s important both personally and professionally for you to get counselling about it.”

He carefully conceded, “There might be some time while we’re docked at Starbase 84, when the engineers are busy, around other meetings I have scheduled while there.”

“I’ll set something up later and put it on your calendar for you.”

Picard nodded in acquiescence, relieved to have spoken about some of it, but still feeling burdened by the enormity and slow pace of the entire situation.

CHAPTER FIVE

Stardate 47220.6 (Sunday 22/03/2370, 12:15) — Main Engineering

Geordi frowned at his console, grumbled, and then called out, “Why am I seeing a potential fault on the ODN line into the forward photon torpedo launcher?”

“Diagnostics were fine yesterday,” Lieutenant Arjun Pierson replied from the central console.

“That’s because it’s not actually a fault yet,” Anna said, turning from her console. “I noted it in my stack to you from last week as a possibility. If it’s what I listed, it’s not structural, just another phase-synchronisation software routine upgrade that got missed on the earlier round on account of me not having clearance to the torpedo bay or to climb around the launch assembly.”

“I can take care of it if you want, sir,” offered Pierson.

“No, you’ve got enough on your plate. Anna, if I send you in with access, you can do the upgrade pretty quickly, right?”

“Yeah, it’s the same as all the other ones I’ve already done.”

Data said, “Perhaps it would be wise for me to escort you in there and run a diagnostic alongside your upgrade, to ensure this particularly sensitive system bears no residual potential faults. Not that I mean to disparage your skills in any way.”

“No, of course not,” Anna said. “I’ll happily admit I don’t have much weapons experience. They make me nervous. I never even properly reset the Baltimore’s beyond basic external phaser parameters. I’ll do the ODN line, you check the launcher assembly, that works for me.”

“Yeah, me too,” Geordi said. “Thanks, you two.”

“Nobody’s going to...you know...fire anything while we’re in there, right?” Anna asked as she rose from her chair.

“We’re less than a day away from a major Federation starbase at fairly high warp,” Geordi said with a chuckle. “Anyone who gives the bridge cause to fire a torpedo right now would have to be on a suicide mission.”

Data noted that Anna did not seem appeased by Geordi’s reassurance, so he clarified, “It is highly unlikely there would be cause to fire torpedoes at this time. As part of entry to the bay, I will register our presence in there. Even so, it is generally safe to be present in the bay area itself while the launcher is activated, as long as all safety procedures are being followed. I will ensure your safety.”

Anna nodded to Data, and the two headed out of main engineering.

“If you would like, I can alert the bridge directly that there will be work going on. The person at the ops station will receive an automated message when I enter the bay, but I can vocally inform them over the comm if that would make you feel safer,” Data offered as they entered the turbolift.

“Um...one of those bridge people will answer, though?”

“Yes. Would the risk of hearing a command officer respond be too stressful to you?”

Anna nodded again.

“Then there is no need. I will simply ensure the standard security message has been sent when I access the door.”

Anna smiled a little, but was clearly still nervous. “Thank you.”

“You are most welcome.”

They exited the turbolift on the port side of Deck Twenty-Five. Data led the way around the tightly curved corridor to the junction that sported the torpedo bay entrance to the fore and the two large docking port airlocks on the port and starboard sides.

As Anna followed him into the junction, she suddenly gasped and leapt back, her eyes wide with terror, her hands twisted tightly against her chest.

Data searched around to see what or whom had frightened her, but they were alone and he observed no clear threat. “What is wrong?”

Breathlessly, Anna replied, “I forgot about the airlocks here. I was too busy worrying about torpedoes and...just...” She pressed her lips together tightly and shook her head.

Data’s brow furrowed. He more carefully regarded each docking port, confirming they were closed as usual. “We are at warp,” he explained. “All airlocks are completely sealed at this time.”

Anna nodded sheepishly. “I know.”

Still confused by her reaction, he added, “In fact, it would take a significant number of both security and engineering overrides to open them. There is no risk of them opening on their own.”

Anna nodded again, then turned away in abject shame.

Despite his bafflement at her fear, Data could see that it was quite visceral for her. He surmised by her posture that she was not likely to be willing to discuss it. “Perhaps we should return to engineering.”

Anna closed her eyes and shook her head again. “No. I’m being completely ridiculous. I’m sorry. I should be able to just...but...”

Data calculated several potential actions based on past interactions where Anna had demonstrated inexplicable fear. He then turned towards the torpedo bay door, entered his code, ensured the automated security alert was sent to the ops station on the bridge, and then when the door open he stood in it and reached his hand out across the corridor junction towards Anna. “It is safe to pass. I promise to keep you safe here.”

Anna opened her eyes, blinked at him, looked at his hand, sighed resolutely, and then stepped forward to put her right hand in his. She cringed again at each docking port, but then hurried into the torpedo bay, still holding Data’s hand.

Data stepped inside as well to allow the door to close behind him. Once it did, she let go of his hand and breathed in loud relief.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “Sorry.”

“There is no need to apologise.”

“It’s hard to...I don’t really want to...”

“There is also no need to explain. My only concern in this moment is for your comfort,” he said as he moved to the console to his left and turned out the chair there for her.

She smiled awkwardly at him as she took the seat. “Thank you. For all of it.”

“Again, you are most welcome. When we have finished, we can use the ladder there to climb to the torpedo storage bay and exit to Deck Twenty-Three instead,” he said, pointing to the ladder on the port wall. “That way you do not need to worry about having to pass the docking ports again. Unfortunately, standard safety procedures require entering as we did to prompt the message I mentioned, but exiting is less restricted in order to facilitate any urgent need to leave.”

Anna visibly relaxed at that suggestion. “Jiminy Crickets, you really do know how to make me feel better. Thank you, again. About a million times over.”

“I am eager to assist you in any way that I can.”

“I can tell. It means a lot to me.”

They remained quietly looking at each other for a moment, and then Anna laughed nervously. She turned to the console behind her. “I suppose I should get on with it.”

“Only if you are ready. There is no rush. I have observed that it is often beneficial for humans to take a few minutes of rest after being frightened.”

“Maybe, sometimes. Sometimes it’s best to find something to do and forget about...bad things.”

“If you wish. I will begin the diagnostic process,” he said as he turned towards the launcher assembly. “Please inform me when your ODN upgrade is complete, so I may initiate a comparison scan to confirm any potential fault errors are eliminated.”

“I will,” she confirmed, and they both got down to work, with Data closely monitoring Anna throughout for any further signs of distress.



Stardate 47220.9 (Sunday 22/03/2370, 15:05) — Main Engineering

Data’s watch over Anna’s mood continued after they had completed their work in the photon torpedo area and then made their way back to main engineering while avoiding any exposure to airlocks. His efforts appeared to have been successful insofar as she displayed no further signs of her inexplicable fear, and in fact seemed to be contentedly working at her usual console while he stood at the central display.

He noticed that his drive to observe and protect her was significantly higher than usual compared to any other friend, which matched his current tendency to devote so much of his processing towards her in general. However in this instance he was also perplexed by the newly revealed fear of airlocks.

He pondered how — both statistically and structurally speaking — anyone could feel less safe beside a fully sealed airlock than other parts of the hull. The very need to keep any hatch safe against accidental opening or rupture meant that airlocks were heavily reinforced with extra fault sensors throughout. Standard windows in quarters — by comparison — were much more likely to account for a breach in any kind of battle or disaster scenario, yet he had observed Anna sitting calmly beside her lab’s windows many times.

He watched as Anna rose from her chair and went into the drive bay area, scanning for something and interacting with several people there. It occurred to him that it was considerably more dangerous to be near an operational warp core than a sealed

docking port while the ship was at warp. Though he considered it to be entirely safe for her to be working as she was — and he would have intervened if he thought otherwise — again it was inexplicable why she would be so frightened of a significantly lower threat.

Anna laughed, and Data enjoyed the sound as he always did. He particularly liked making her laugh, but he was content when she laughed for any reason. He noted that Aisling was speaking to her, then returned his eyes to his own work, satisfied that multiple people were contributing to Anna's happiness.

Yet even as he performed his own engineering task, he continued to consider the puzzle of the airlocks. He had observed that humans were adept at spotting patterns, which made them exceptional creators of a multitude of arts and sciences in ways that were limited for other species. However, he had also observed that a downside to this was a proclivity towards imagining patterns that were not actually there, which led them to create religions and superstitions on the societal scale as well as personal habits and psychoses on the individual scale.

Based on his previous interactions with humans who exhibited undue concern for non-threats while paying little heed to actual threats, he concluded it was likely that something unpleasant and frightening had happened to Anna — most likely in her youth, therefore most likely in her time aboard the *Baltimore* — which caused her to experience a fear of airlocks. He also recognised that her unwillingness to speak with Counselor Troi meant this fear would not likely be resolved, so as a friend it behooved him to make an effort to help her avoid exposure to that which she feared.

As Data set himself a series of programming filters and alerts to ensure minimal exposure of Anna to any visible external hull port in the future, he also observed her returning to her chair, whereupon she began to rapidly enter information into the console with her right hand while her left fiddled with her braided hair.

He surmised that the increase in this fidgeting activity was likely a manifestation of nervous energy, since he had observed

similar behaviours in multiple crew members, especially in engineering. Nervous cadets on the bridge employed less overtly visible actions — such as shifting their feet or biting their lips — but engineers of all ranks routinely displayed a wide variety of fidgeting actions in times of stress.

However, Data also realised that if such habits were indeed commonplace, his much more concentrated observations of Anna's in particular were yet another odd new behaviour on his own part.

He completed the task at the central console, put the associated PADD on the rack of completed tasks, took another PADD from the senior section of incomplete tasks, read what was required, and then moved to the fore end of the central console to begin that work. Though he was certain he had not deliberately selected the PADD based on ending up at that position, he noted that it afforded him an even more linear view of Anna.

As he began, his brow furrowed in calculations of why he was so fascinated by the way her fingers entwined in her braided hair. He discovered that he was experiencing a strange compulsion to get closer that he might examine the crinkled locks of hair as they rolled over her shoulder.

Data had seen many hairstyles throughout his life, particularly in his years on the Enterprise. Elaborate, multi-braided styles were very popular as a permitted means of self-expression while in uniform, and he had occasionally been interested in the mathematical properties of such styles. But something about Anna idly undoing her left braid kept capturing his attention to the point of nearly distracting him away from his work.

He made himself look down at his screen again, drilled down through several LCARS layers to where the access point for the task lay, but then his eyes were drawn upwards once more to Anna.

It occurred to him that he was likely paying more attention to her sixty-percent undone braid than she was. He found that he wished to count the strands in each lock, and the realisation that he would not be able to do so instantly piqued his interest. He had never considered that before; that an abundance of human hair

exceeded his ability to count items at a single glance. The desire to hold her hair in his hand and prove it to himself as not immediately countable was so sudden and strong that he actually did become distracted away from his task.

Data thought about how often he had stood beside or behind Counselor Troi when her abundant, bouncing curls had been within arm's reach, yet he had never once considered reaching out to touch them; not only because of the violation of personal space but because the idea had simply never occurred to him before. Yet the more he watched Anna's fingers slide through her hair, the more he wanted to do so himself.

Confused, he reached up and touched his own hair but found that action completely unsatisfying. His hair was simply his hair, and Counselor Troi's hair was merely hers, and everyone else around him with hair was likewise incidental.

Yet Anna's remained an enticing mystery of texture, form, and potential calculation. What was the mass of each lock? When she braided it, did she take care to make each section equal in size, and if so how accurate was her assessment? Did handedness matter; were the locks more equal on one side than the other because of where her dominant hand was placed? If he were to braid her hair, what would his level of accuracy of strand count be?

Data closed his eyes for a moment to reset his quickly branching thought process. He also ran a split-second diagnostic to determine that his distraction was not from any mechanical or programming source. When he opened his eyes again, he found that he was still looking at Anna, and still wished very much to touch her hair.

However, his ethical overrides kicked in and he forced himself to look back at his console once more. As much as he had several friends on board who would likely be entirely willing to allow him to touch their hair in this quest for calculations, he was certain that touching Anna's hair would be even more of a boundary violation than if he had ever reached out to touch one of Counselor Troi's curls. Anna's history had rendered her habitually frightened of

unexpected physical contact, which is why her willingness to take his hand when offered was so profoundly meaningful to them both. Data knew that that trust would be shattered if he were to attempt to touch her hair as she idly fiddled with it, and the thought of damaging her trust in him caused him significant alarm.

Thus, he was finally able to set such thoughts aside and resume his task.



Across the room, Geordi had been juggling so many jobs of his own that he knew he was letting some fall, but hoped his talented and eager staff would pick up the pieces as he went. Somewhere in amidst his mental stack he noticed that Data was standing at the central console, staring forward with a very strange expression on his face.

Someone behind him handed him a PADD and said, “This work for you, boss?”

Geordi turned to see David Sorenson’s glib grin. He chuckled, looked at the readout on the PADD, and said, “Yeah, that’ll be fine. Take Begum and Dern with you.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Sorenson said as he turned to gather his team.

Geordi turned back to Data and saw that he was still staring forward.

No, not today buddy, he thought. We do not have time today to find out you’re having some kind of weird failure, please.

He headed over, noticing that just as he did so Data closed his eyes for a moment and then looked down at the central console. As Geordi arrived by his side, Data began running a software reset on the tertiary power couplings.

“Hey Data, you okay?” Geordi asked.

Data began, “I am functioning within —” but then blinked rapidly, turned to Geordi, and said, “Yes. I am fine. Thank you for asking. Are you okay?”

Wait a minute, Data hasn't answered me with his 'normal parameters' script in ages. That means for a moment there, he didn't realise who he was talking to. Is Data...distracted? Is that even possible? Geordi wondered with some alarm. He carefully said, "You...uh...looked a little lost in space there for a moment."

"It would be unlikely for me to become lost in main engineering."

"What then? Just calculating some fascinating new theory?"

Data hesitated, and then replied, "That would be one way of putting it."

"Okay, well, sorry for interrupting, but I was worried you were maybe...experiencing a malfunction or something."

"I have just performed a minor self-diagnostic. I appear to be functioning within —"

"Normal parameters, yeah, got it," Geordi said.

There was a small burst of laughter from across the room. Both men looked to see Aisling and Arjun standing beside Anna, showing her something on a PADD that was apparently amusing to all three.

But when Geordi turned to look at Data again, that same distant look was on the latter's face. *No, not distant*, he realised. *It's wonder. He's watching her with the weirdest expression of wonder I've ever seen on him. What the hell?*

Then it occurred to him how Data's face matched a common expression he had seen on others many times before, but Data lacked the usual skin temperature changes that went with that sort of thing. Geordi watched Data watching Anna for a moment, and then muttered to himself, "Well there's a first. Okay then. Wow."

Data blinked rapidly again, and then turned to Geordi. "Pardon me, I did not hear what you said."

"No, I don't imagine you did. Or anything else in that moment, for that matter," he said, patting Data's arm.

Data regarded Geordi's hand with confusion. "Are you certain that you are all right?"

"Yeah, Data, I'm good. I think you're doing just fine too."

Data's brow went up and down several times in confusion.

Geordi laughed as he patted Data's arm again. "We'll talk about...other distractions another time. Let's just get this damned installation done with first."

"Hm," Data replied, so Geordi left him to attend to much more pressing and rational matters than a potentially infatuated android.



Data briefly attempted to decode what Geordi may have meant, but then his attention returned to a divided state between his task and watching Anna.

A few minutes later there was a loud crashing noise from the upper deck around the warp drive, followed immediately by Ensigns Abakumov and Tyler calling down confirmation that everything was all right.

Data took a few steps towards the drive bay door, but Geordi had already leapt up from his chair to rush into the bay and shout, "What's going on up there?"

"Uh, sorry sir," Abakumov said. "We found an unexpected fault in the new starboard coolant conduit."

"But it's not hooked up yet so everything's fine," Tyler hastened to add.

"Well everything isn't fine if it's not ready for the switchover tomorrow," Geordi said irritably, putting his hands on his hips.

Data noticed that Anna was peering up through the window over her console. Only then did she appear to notice that her left braid was undone, when the locks tumbled down onto the screen in front of her. She tilted her head to the side to watch what was happening on the upper deck while quickly re-braiding her hair.

Data was peripherally aware of the ensuing conversation about what had likely gone wrong with the new conduit and could have recounted it word-for-word if asked, but his focus was entirely upon Anna's hair and the single strand that fell from her fingers as she finished putting it back together unevenly.

He watched as she subtly put her leg back on under the console desk and then stood to go assist the Ensigns along with Geordi.

As all other eyes in the room focused on the apparently urgent matter at hand, Data calmly walked over to where the strand of Anna's hair lay on the floor. He had already calculated based on what was said that the matter was not actually urgent, that the others had it under control, and that it was merely the shock of the loud sound which had startled the humans during a stressful time serving as the real cause of the sense of urgency.

Data squatted down for a closer look at the hair, considering how tiny it was on its own yet so clearly discernible upon the carpet. He pondered the juxtaposition of how quickly a single hair could disappear in aggregate. He noted the hair's curves and wondered if that was natural to Anna's hair or an artefact of having been held in the braid. He realised he had never seen her with her hair fully down and found himself imagining what she would look like with it down while in the sunny meadow they had shared on the holodeck. He imagined her joyously playing in the grass, laughing, the sun shining through and reflecting from all of those individual hairs swaying in the breeze. The notion of being able to calculate mathematically emergent properties of her hair's flow while she played struck him as an intensely satisfactory activity.

Suddenly the hair began to disappear; Data realised it had sat long enough that the carpet's cleaning nanites had gone to work upon it. He watched it disintegrate and decided it was good that it had, because he was aware that a small part of him had begun to calculate the many issues around potentially touching it or even taking it. Those calculations all indicated such an action as being invasive even if Anna was unaware of it or even if he only did so out of appreciative curiosity.

Since the nanites had satisfactorily solved the problem for him, Data stood, intending to purge the entire subject out of his current thought processes. But when he walked to the drive bay door to observe the conduit repair in progress, he found himself primarily watching how deftly Anna contributed to the solution while also

kindly reassuring the worried Ensigns that the fault lay with whomever had incorrectly aligned one of the internal parts, not their scanning procedures.

For absolutely no valid reason he could think of, Data found himself envisioning warm sunshine cascading down from the ceiling and a carpet of lush grass covering the upper deck. His brow furrowed as he moved to examine the deck from the underside, where he could see soil and roots as if it was a floating garden.

Carefully, Data looked around to discern if anyone else was seeing what he was seeing, but it was clear they were not. He was aware that it was not real, but yet unable to banish the image.

He moved back again to where he could see Anna. Her hair was down, blowing in a breeze that did not exist, the sun's rays somehow focused upon her more than anybody else there.

“Excuse me, sir,” someone said abruptly to his right, jostling past him quickly with a repair case in hand.

Data blinked, noted that it was Pierson on his way to assist the others, and then turned back to the inexplicable scene only to find that it was gone; there was no sunshine, no grass, Anna's hair was braided, and everything was back to normal.

Data frowned in concern. At no time did he believe he had lost touch with reality, yet the illusion's depth and persistence was well outside his normal imaginative parameters. He turned and left engineering for the cybernetics lab to run another series of diagnostics.

CHAPTER SIX

Stardate 47221.3 (Sunday 22/03/2370, 18:45) — Main Engineering

Geordi grunted softly and leaned back in his chair. His VISOR was aching something fierce and he was becoming exhausted to the point of his arms feeling like they might float in the air if he let them.

He looked around engineering and could tell by the relative temperature-colours of faces and visible heart rates that he wasn't alone in his fatigue. Everyone except for Data — who had disappeared for a time but recently returned — showed physical signs of needing a rest.

Geordi watched Data briefly to see if the latter was still gazing at Anna, but Data appeared to be fixated on something on the warp propulsion systems status display console on the port side of the room, meaning his back was mostly turned towards the chief engineer's corner where Anna sat.

Eventually Geordi turned to look at Anna himself and noticed that she was rechecking a series of readouts that had already been confirmed multiple times. He rolled his chair over to her and said, “Hey there. You already did that, and so did four others.”

She turned tiredly to him, shrugged, and then said, “Yeah. I'm doing it again.”

“Why?”

Anna squirmed a little. “I feel like I need to these things over and over again until I can do it all without even having to look at a console or a PADD so that I can help fix anything that goes wrong on the fly.”

This wasn't the first time Geordi had faced a young engineer trying to take on too much responsibility, and having done so himself he understood the motivations involved. He also knew

what needed to be said to bring someone down off of that precipice of stress. “Anna,” he said gently, “Nobody expects that of you.”

“I expect it of me,” she said defensively. “I’m terrified of letting any of you down.”

Geordi nodded and leaned forward towards her, clasping his hands the way he’d seen Counselor Troi and other kindly advisors do. “I understand what that’s like. Most of the people in here do. When we work with engines and power systems and all this stuff that keeps everyone on board alive, the pressure can be a lot. But you’re not going to let anybody down, because we do have consoles and PADDs to refer to, and anyway it’s not all riding on you.”

Anna winced.

Geordi continued, “I know it feels like it is. Everyone here gets that. But we all also have to learn that we’re a team and none of us is solely responsible for any of it. That’s why we’ve done all this prep, so that the installation can go as smoothly as possible and we’re all equipped as a team to handle any problems that crop up together. I asked you to be part of this team because of your expertise with the new drive; not because I want you or anyone else to shoulder the burden of the whole thing.”

Anna sighed and nodded. “I know that in my logical brain, but in my gut it feels like...” She twisted her mouth to the side and made an angry little grumbling sound.

“Like everyone’s going to blame you?”

She nodded.

“Well, we’re not going to. Not going to happen. Things go right, things go wrong, we don’t trash each other for any of it.”

Anna nodded again, but looked down at the floor. Geordi could tell by her skin temperature that she’d gone pale, and he saw her twisting her hands together which he’d come to recognise as a sign that she was struggling to say something difficult. He waited patiently for her to finally whisper, “I want to stay.”

He was taken aback by the statement, but then immediately elated. “You mean here, on the Enterprise, right? After the installation?” he asked with a widening grin.

Anna nodded again.

“That’s great! That just made my day! But wait, why do you look so upset about it?”

“Because if something goes wrong, maybe I won’t be able to.”

“What? No, Anna, that’s not...no, we don’t treat people like that. Look, if we made people leave because of engineering faults we’d have nobody left to staff the place! Please, please believe me when I say you are a valued member of this team and I am begging you to stay no matter what happens with the drive. Which, incidentally, will be fine because all of us keep going over the same damned things repeatedly like you’re doing now.” He sat up taller in his chair and looked around again. “But you’re not the only one running yourself ragged. You need a break. Hell, I need a break.” He stood, adjusted his uniform, and said, “I’m about to enforce a break for everyone.”

He walked to the centre of the room and called out, “Okay everyone, gather ‘round.”

Everyone not an active task tiredly moved into a loose circle around him, and even those on active tasks paid heed from their stations.

“It’s nearly 1900 and we’ve gone over everything for the new drive dozens of times. I know how some of you are; well, too many of you!” Geordi said with a laugh. “You’ll obsess over it all night and be frazzled in the morning. So unless you’re on second shift right now, get out of here. Go. I mean it!” He waved his hand in the direction of the exit as there were murmurs of acceptance all around. “Go rest. Go get some R&R. Go read a book.” He pointed to a tall, quiet man in the back and said, “Go feed your kittens, Myers,” prompting an appreciative chuckle from the group.

Geordi turned and pointed to a woman on the other side. “Go stick googly eyes all over your quarters, McGrath.”

The Lieutenant pumped up a tired fist of triumph, prompting more friendly laughter.

“Whatever your thing is, go do it,” Geordi ordered. “Get out of here. Come back rested for your next shift or wherever you are on the adjusted duty roster. Like my grandma used to say to the feral cat that hung around our porch: ‘Scram!’”

The murmur increased to jovial conversations as the team wrapped up procedures and began to head out of the area.

Data moved to stand beside Geordi. “You have told me that your grandmother often fed that cat.”

“Yeah, she did,” Geordi agreed, nodding at the folks walking out. “And she told it to scram. They had a complicated relationship.”

“Hm,” Data replied.

“That order’s for you too, you know.”

“I am incapable of fatigue.”

“Yeah, but you’re second officer and you need to set an example.” Geordi lowered his voice and indicated back towards his corner with the slightest nod. “Especially to certain people in here.”

Data nodded. “Understood. I will ascertain if more social time is in order.”

Geordi smiled at his friend. “Good. You do that.” He then closely watched as Data went to Anna’s side.

Anna was still seated, as she had been throughout Geordi’s announcement. Data said to her, “There will likely now be a queue for holodeck slots. However, we should follow Geordi’s directive to take a break nonetheless.”

Anna smiled up at him. “I was thinking I could do a with a dose of my favourite movie. I’ve got a pretty good console I can use as a screen in my lab, if you want to come watch it with me.”

Data replied, “That would be acceptable if that is your preferred location, however there are several meeting rooms with better viewing opportunities and more comfortable seating options.”

Her smile faltered. “I don’t think I’m up to braving the saucer section right now.”

“There are several such facilities here in the drive section,” Data said.

She perked back up. “Oh, I hadn’t thought of that. Okay,” she said as she put her leg back on and stood. She looked to Geordi and asked, “Want to come too? For the *Wizard of Oz*?”

“Thanks, but I’m keen to get to my quarters and take this thing off,” Geordi replied, tapping the side of his VISOR. “Maybe another time.”

“Okay,” she said, turning back to Data as the two began to walk out together. “Have you seen it before?”

“I have not,” Data said. “You have mentioned it several times and I am aware of multiple popular culture references to it that have persisted over the centuries, so I am intrigued to watch it and share in your perspective on it.”

She beamed up at him as they went around the corner.

Geordi grinned at them, his hands on his hips. *I don’t know what that means and I probably need to talk to him about it soon, but right now it looks really nice, especially if it’s helping to keep her here on board.*



Stardate 47221.4 (Sunday 22/03/2370, 19:05) — Deck Thirty-Three

Data exited the turbolift first and then gestured towards port. Anna came out cautiously, looked around for a moment, and then exited as well.

“Isn’t that the brigs down there?” she asked, pointing down the corridor leading starboard.

“Yes, four of the eight on board,” Data confirmed, wondering if she would be fearful of them in the same way that she was the airlocks.

“Are there people locked up in them right now?”

“Not that I am aware of. It is uncommon for us to require such incarceration for long. Minor crew infractions typically result in being confined to quarters. In cases such as the recent attack by the Tarkanian delegation, those deemed dangerous were housed in the brig only until such time as we could deliver them into more appropriate custody at Deep Space Four, but even then it was considered safe to keep Doctor Yomet in his guest quarters, albeit with a security presence,” Data explained. “There are no dangerous people in them right now. You need not fear.”

“Oh, I wasn’t worried about that,” Anna said as she started to walk the direction Data had indicated. “More like I don’t want to ever get trapped in there.”

“That is unlikely.”

“And anyway, even if there were bad people in there right now and they escaped, I’m with you, and I’m pretty sure you’d keep me safe from them.”

“I would indeed. We have arrived,” he said as he stepped close enough to the door of Screening Room 5844 to make it open for them. “We use this room primarily for viewing training videos, but because it has a replicator plus these padded chairs and couches, it is often used for small gatherings to view entertainment features as well.”

“Oh, how lovely!” Anna exclaimed with her hands clasped before her as she followed him in. Then she noticed the large, curved viewscreen and gasped. “Why, that’s enormous! Almost like being in a real cinema! Have you ever been to a real cinema?”

“There is one on the Academy campus I have attended for several events, yes. Have you?”

Anna nodded eagerly. “Where I lived just outside of Cambridge, England, there was an old-fashioned theatre that showed very, very old movies from time to time and whenever

they were musicals showing I went, as long as I didn't think it'd be too crowded."

"There will be no crowd here today. Where would you like to sit?"

"That couch looks like the perfect spot, don't you think?" she asked as she skipped over to it and flopped back on it with a giggle. "Oh, it's soft! But not too squishy that I'll get stuck! I love it!"

Data nodded at her with a little smile of his own and then sat beside her.

But then Anna suddenly stood back up and rushed over to the replicator. "I'm going to have popcorn with extra salt and extra butter. Want some?" Then she turned to him with a slightly worried expression to ask, "You do eat sometimes, right? Even though you don't have to?"

"I do, yes, when it socially appropriate. I cannot taste food the way humans do, but I am able to analyse the compounds and draw my own variety of experience from it. I would like very much to share your complete experience of the film."

Anna grinned, ordered two popcorn tubs from the replicator, and then brought them both to the couch. She handed him one, sat down more carefully, sighed happily, and then used her left foot to dislodge her right leg and kicked it so the artificial portion fell out from the pant leg, landing on the floor in front of the couch. Then she nestled herself back into the corner, drawing the remainder of her legs up under her. "This is extremely comfortable."

Data — who was sitting with his usual perfectly straight posture — nodded and then attempted to adopt a more relaxed position himself, leaning back into his corner of the couch but with his back still very straight, which resulted in both an awkward viewing angle and risk of spilling his popcorn onto his lap. He looked to Anna again, who gave an encouraging wiggle deeper into her corner. Once more Data nodded and replicated her movements, wiggling himself into the fold of the couch and its arm, allowing his body to contour to the supportive shape.

“Better?” Anna asked.

“I experience neither comfort nor discomfort, but I can imagine how using the furniture’s structure to facilitate muscle relaxation is quite likely very comfortable for you, and I am enjoying experimenting with it.”

Anna laughed softly. “Well you look more comfortable, if that’s meaningful to you.”

“Thank you. It is.”

“Good. I would really like you to enjoy this whole thing. I should warn you, though, that after watching this I’ll start talking like they do in the movie more again. It gets in my brain.”

“Yes, I recall your explanation of this inspiration for you to say ‘why’ as a start to many statements that are not questions.”

“That and a bunch of other things I now think of as ‘Dorothyisms’ like ‘Jiminy Crickets’ and ‘oh dear!’ and such. I watched this more than I heard real-life people talking, so I thought that’s how people talked.”

“Perhaps we should begin so I may discover the source of more of your idioms.”

With that, they called up the classic 1939 movie to begin on the screen across the room. As it played, Data noticed that Anna was mouthing along not just with the songs, but the full dialogue as well. At the point where the twister had hit and Dorothy was waking to the improbable scenes of people and objects blowing past her bedroom window, Data asked, “Have you memorised the entire script?”

Anna giggled. “Yes, sorry. I’m working quite hard to not sing and speak along.”

“You may if you wish, if that increases your enjoyment.”

“Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t,” she said as she waved to the knitting lady just as Dorothy did. “I’m trying to stay quiet so you can enjoy it fully yourself. Maybe another time we can have a sing-a-long.”

“I would like to do that as well,” Data replied, noting with high satisfaction how this was the most at-ease he had ever seen her,

and how much he wished to find ways to maintain this level of joy and comfort for her at any opportunity.



Stardate 47221.5 (Sunday 22/03/2370, 20:15) — Picard's Quarters

Picard finished his evening tea, set the cup and saucer on the edge of the low table before him, and then tried to relax back into his comfortable chair to continue reading reports on his PADD. He felt himself tiring and considered going to bed, but foolishly checked his calendar for the next day; he'd expected the arrival at Starbase 84, of course, and the inevitable meetings with various Starfleet personnel there, but seeing the notation that Deanna had booked an afternoon slot with him in a private lounge on the starbase made him shudder fully awake.

He groaned and set the PADD down. She was right, of course, to want him to talk about his old family life as part of helping him with what might be his new family life, but that didn't mean he was up to it. *She bloody well knows I hate that subject, and she's being so damned supportive and professional about it that she's left me no valid room to refuse*, he thought grumpily.

He closed his eyes and found himself wondering what kind of father he could possibly be without a decent role model of his own. *That's why I rebuffed Meredith's plans for starting a family*, he thought, but then admitted to himself, *Well, that and I really had never planned for that relationship to become serious at all*.

Picard sat pondering his guilt at having been so cruel to Meredith White in his parting words to her, telling her that he had no intention of having children with anyone, least of all her. He hadn't even considered at the time that she might already be pregnant, since he'd taken all due precautions on his end. But the discovery of Anna's existence aligning with his time with Meredith prompted a memory of how she'd put her hands protectively over

her belly when he'd spoken those words, and he felt ill over what he'd said.

Did Father ever feel this guilt for any of his cruel words? he wondered. No, he never would have seen himself as guilty of anything. He was always right about everything, in his estimation, and angry when the rest of the world failed to agree with him.

He recognised that his relationship with Meredith was entirely different than that of his parents. He and Meredith had attended a lot of parties together with raucous nights of lovemaking afterwards; while he accepted the likelihood that his parents must have had romantic love in abundance in their early days, neither was the sort to attend the sorts of parties young Starfleet officers threw. From the stories he'd heard, his parents had married early in their relationship, which was part of why he had no plans to do so himself lest he end up in the same sort of unhappy home.

I was clear from the start with Meredith that all I wanted back then was casual fun, he thought. She wanted more, but I never promised it. I was careful to never, ever promise anything of the sort. Then again...I might've been a bit of a pig about it, using her lavish attentions to fulfil my own needs without giving much beyond the moment back to her, he conceded.

I was much more selfish, much more self-centred in those days, I admit. And...perhaps when I said those words to her, I wanted her to be hurt enough so that she'd stop needing me so damned much. I didn't want to be needed. I didn't know how to respond to being needed!

Picard groaned under the weight of the unpleasant memories, reaching up with a heavy arm to rub his aching forehead. He sighed and tried to back away from it all, to see it from an external point of view for more rational examination. *If I'm honest with myself now, I didn't want her to force me to accept my inevitable failure if I pretended to give something that's just not in me to give.*

That's different than Father's cruelty. I'm not like him. He was all about control and dominance, and while yes we all use people

and yes I was using more of Meredith than was fair, I didn't use her like a tool for my own ends...did I?

He let his arm fall back down onto the armrest, simultaneously exhausted and wound up by these torturous mental loops. *Father used people like tools and then got angry when those tools didn't perform as expected. Is that what I did to Meredith? Was that the source of my anger in those words? No, I don't think so. I...I don't want to think so. I cannot be like him. I refuse to be like him.*

Frowning at the ceiling above, he told himself firmly, *These are the intrusive thoughts Deanna has warned me to look out for. I will not sit here and berate myself for my father's transgressions. I am guilty of many things, but I have never habitually abused anybody. I have never sought to keep anybody under my thumb and control. I have no desire for any sort of manipulative or unequal relationship. I can and will control my own thoughts, however, and I order this nonsense out of my head this instant!*

For a moment, he imagined this technique had been successful. His mind cleared, his shoulders relaxed, and he took a deep breath as he let his eyes close.

But then a flicker of a memory shot through his mind so fast he scarcely glimpsed it; his father carrying his mother somewhere as she screamed for help. Everything in him clamped down hard on the notion, blurring it into fog immediately, but nonetheless his heart pounded and he gripped the armrests tightly in momentary panic. As he gasped desperately to regain control, the image of the Borg Queen laughing at him in his dream the night before filled in the gaps left by banishing the memory, making him stand up so fast that his knee clipped the edge of the saucer on the table, sending the cup and saucer spinning through the air before bouncing to the floor, smashing the cup in the process.

"Bloody hell!" he shouted, another memory of his father smashing a teacup in the kitchen trying to push its way into his head. He barked, "No!" at all of it, then turned so he could lean on the chair with both hands and take another deep breath with his eyes closed.

Quickly he muttered to himself, "I am Jean-Luc Picard, I am a Starfleet officer, I am human, and there are..." He paused to look up at the ceiling again and count the lights that he had counted so many times before. "There are fourteen lights in these quarters. Yes. I'm fine. Everything is fine," he told himself as he stood straight once more, adjusted his uniform, and then bent down to pick up the pieces of the teacup and saucer.

With calm, deliberate steps, he took the pieces to the replicator and carefully set them on the tray. He activated the recycling process and stood watching as dozens of little lights moved around the pieces to disintegrate it all back into the ship's stock of organic particulate suspension; all very proper, all very controlled, all entirely acceptable.

Still, he knew that attempting to sleep any time soon would be a bad idea, so he tapped his combadge and said, "Picard to Data."

The computer responded, "*Lieutenant Commander Data is marked as currently unavailable excepting emergency. Do you wish to initiate emergency communication or leave a message?*"

"Leave a message," he replied. When the computer chirped to indicate he could begin recording, he said, "Data, I recognise you're all quite busy with the engine upgrade, but should you decide to take any time off this evening...well frankly I could use a distracting trip to the holodeck as Dixon Hill. Do please let me know if you become available."

He tapped the badge to end the message, and then sighed as he rubbed the back of his neck, unsure what to do with himself. He walked into the middle of his quarters, put his hands on his hips, and looked around for some other distraction.

The isolinear chip with Anna's logs caught his eye, but he shook his head it and said, "No, absolutely not." Then he glanced further upwards to his bookshelf behind his desk and smiled.

Picard picked up his well-worn copy of *Dixon Hill in The Parrot's Claw*. It was one of the many novels he loved that his father had referred to as his "damned fool books." Picard held it lovingly in his hands, muttered, "Sod off, you old crank," at a

mental image of his father, and then took the novel over to his chair to enjoy regardless of what anybody else thought of any of it.



Stardate 47221.6 (Sunday 22/03/2370, 21:07) — Deck Thirty-Three — Screening Room 5844

The movie concluded. Anna stretched up her arms with a contented sigh. “That was perfect. Exactly what I needed. I think I might actually be able to sleep tonight after all.”

“That is good,” Data replied. “I have noted that several of the crew like to perform repetitive rituals before sleep in ways they describe as ‘boring’ so as to calm their minds. Is that why you watch this repeatedly? Because knowing the entire script makes it boring for you?”

“Oh no, it’s not boring!” she said emphatically. “It’s comfortable, like your favourite blankets on the best bed you ever had.”

“You experience a tactile sensation?”

“Why, of course! All the senses, all comforting and happy and just...mmmm,” she said, trailing off into a hum of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”. Then she laughed, held up her empty popcorn tub, and added, “It’s taste and smell and visuals and music and touch and all of it all together. It’s all sensor input levels at maximum in a way I’m completely accustomed to, so I know what’s coming in every second, every frame, every note, every song, and every dance. Something about anticipating the next good bit in total security that it will happen the way it always does is the sweetest comfort I’ve ever known.”

“Hm,” he replied, his brow up as he recognised a pleasant shared experience. “Your description of how you experience this film closely matches my definition of friendship.”

“Does it really?” she asked eagerly. “How do you define friendship?”

“As I experience certain sensory input patterns from social interactions, my mental pathways become accustomed to them. These inputs eventually are anticipated and even missed when absent.”

Anna flopped back into the corner of the couch with a dramatic swoon. “Oh, I love that! That’s perfect! That’s what being around you is like too! I’m getting used to feeling safe and happy around you and some of the other people here . That’s why I just told Geordi I want to stay, even after the drive’s done.”

“That is very good news. I am honoured to be amongst those who have made you feel welcome enough to remain on board.” He stood and added, “If you are ready to retire, would you like me to walk you to your quarters?”

“That would be very sweet of you, as always, thank you,” she said, wriggling out of the corner of the couch.

As Anna put her leg back on, Data put both popcorn tubs back into the replicator for recycling. She asked, “Did you like the movie?”

“Yes. The story was very pleasant, and I liked how the fantastical elements were alluded to in the real-world portions, giving the viewer the choice to see it all as a dream or not. It is nice to ascertain the context for the many cultural references I have heard,” he said as they walked out to the corridor. “For instance, more than once people have referred to me as a sort of Tin Man, and I can see now how that analogy holds. Though I am not made of tin, I am an artificial creation and I share the Tin Man’s aspirations for human emotions. However, I do not anticipate I will attain this goal by virtue of a wizard.”

“You never know,” Anna replied playfully. “There’s a lot of magic out there in the universe. I’ve always wanted to skip down a yellow brick road but I can’t make my leg work that way, yet I hold out hope that someday it might happen.”

Data paused at the junction to the corridor that lead to the turbolift. “The Scarecrow was only able to skip down the road with Dorothy’s support. Perhaps you simply need support as well,” he said, extending his left elbow towards her.

Anna put her hands to her heart. “Data, I do believe you are the personification of the magic of the universe,” she said as slipped her right arm into his elbow.

“We’re off to see the Wizard?” Data asked.

“The wonderful Wizard of Oz,” Anna replied, clearly moved.

Starting slowly and gently, Data guided Anna down the corridor, passing the turbolift entirely, supporting her weight like a crutch for her right leg so that they both could begin to skip together just as Dorothy and the Scarecrow had in the film. As they picked up speed, Anna let out a joyous laugh, prompting Data to record every aspect of the event to his long-term memory.

“We hear he is a whiz of a wiz, if ever a wiz there was!” she sang out as they turned and doubled back. *“If ever, oh ever a wiz there was the Wizard of Oz is one because, because, because, because, because, because! Because of the wonderful things he does!”*

When they arrived back at their starting point, Anna nearly tripped from the speed of it, but she hung onto his arm and swung around to catch her balance, laughing loudly. “That was a dream come true!” she exclaimed, letting go of his arm and leaning on the corridor corner behind her. She put her hands to her heart again and added, “You are very good at making my dreams come true.”

“Your dreams appear to be quite easy to fulfil. I anticipate your dreams of a warp engine incorporating your theories will come true tomorrow as well.”

“Let’s hope so. I should get some sleep to help make that happen!”

Data indicated towards the turbolift, enjoying the way she beamed his favourite smile at him the entire way back to her quarters. Once there, she thanked him again and bid him goodnight.

Data turned away from her door back towards the turbolift. Once inside he activated his combadge once more and discovered Picard's message. He welcomed the opportunity to share in another friend's entertainment and tapped the badge to reply.



Stardate 47221.6 (Sunday 22/03/2370, 21:20) — Picard's Quarters

Picard was uncomfortably beginning to doze off in his chair with his book in his lap when his combadge startled him awake.

"Data to Picard. I have just received your message. I apologise for being unavailable earlier."

"No no, not at all," Picard replied, regaining his composure.

"If you still wish to engage with Dixon Hill, Lieutenant Bean will be finished with Holodeck Three in ten minutes. I could meet you there, suitably attired."

Picard glanced at his antique analogue clock on the shelf. He usually went to bed by this time when circumstances allowed, but he recognised he'd likely sleep better if he stayed up late for this much-needed leisure activity first. "That would be much appreciated, thank you. I'll be there shortly."

"Understood, sir," Data replied and terminated the communication.

Picard stood up, put his book away, and quickly changed into his Dixon Hill costume. As soon as he put the hat on, he felt thoroughly transformed and knew this was exactly what he needed. He hurried down to Deck Eleven and found Data arriving at the same time from the other direction, dressed as Carlos.

"Good evening, sir," Data said cheerily.

Picard found Data's enthusiasm to be a tonic in and of itself. "And to you, Data. I take it preparations for the new drive are coming along well?"

“Yes sir. Most teams concluded around 1900. Geordi was insistent that those not on regular shift engage in relaxation activities.”

Picard nodded approvingly as he selected the holodeck program on the exterior panel. “And how did you relax?”

“I watched an ancient film with Specialist White.”

Picard’s lighthearted mood was instantly shattered, jarring him enough that he nearly selected the wrong program on the screen that would have landed them in a children’s holo-novel called *Diggory Duggery* about sentient colonial construction apparatus. He took a deep breath, selected the proper Dixon Hill program, and tried to sound casual as he inquired, “Oh? What film?”

“*The Wizard of Oz*. I had not seen it, though I was aware of its cultural and technological impact. Have you seen it, sir?” Data asked as they entered the holodeck.

Struggling to control his tumultuous emotions as the door closed behind him, Picard put on a smile and said, “Yes, many decades ago. My mother quite liked it.”

“Hm,” Data replied with a polite nod. “It clearly has a profound meaning for many humans.”

Picard’s smile became slightly more genuine with the recollection of how happy that film had made his mother. Whenever Aunt Adele came to visit Maman, the two watched it together in what was clearly a long-held ritual. Occasionally he’d join in even though he found much of the film to be a bit silly. “Yes, I suppose it does,” he replied.

But just as Picard began to wistfully consider how this was yet another way Anna and Maman seemed to be linked across space and time, a woman in an elegant blue gown well out of place in this dingy corner of the city came running up to them shouting for help.

Picard and Data became Dixon Hill and Carlos respectively, stepping towards the woman in need just as she was shot from behind and fell towards the damp pavement at their feet. Picard

caught her just before she hit the ground. Data drew a handgun in defence.

A man in a pinstripe suit across the street called out, “Regards from Bad Bernadette,” tipped his hat towards them with a menacing grin, and then ran off into the astonished, gathering crowd.

The lady in Picard’s arms looked up at him and implored, “Dix, you’ve got to warn Nicky. Harmful Harmony knows about...” She fell limp, dying before she could finish the sentence.

Data remarked, “It would seem we will once again be meeting with Nicky the Nose.”

“And with great haste, Carlos,” Picard replied, letting the woman gently down to the ground as police began to arrive, whistles blowing loudly from all directions other than the alley to their left. “We need to go, now!”

They nodded at each other and hurried down the alley as the adventure began.



Stardate 47222.4 (Monday 23/03/2370, 04:00) — Data’s Quarters

After tending to Spot and a few other casual duties, Data decided that since he was not on the current bridge shift, it would be a good time to once again explore his dream program. He went to bed with his uniform and shoes still on, set an internal chronometer alarm of 0530, performed several human-like gestures of pre-sleep rituals, and then laid on his back and closed his eyes.

He found himself in a strange little village lined with small, ornately decorated homes and lavish gardens. Turning to examine his surroundings, he also noted that in the centre of the village two paths converged in a spiral together: a red bricked road and a yellow bricked road. Data recognised that he was in the Munchkin village from *The Wizard of Oz*, and nodded appreciatively.

Several Munchkins gathered in groups near a little park to the side of the town, all holding each other in fear and regarding an elderly woman wearing a black dress, striped leggings, and sparkling, bright red shoes. The woman stood in the centre of the park and appeared to be in mid-speech to the Munchkins, though her words were garbled and nonsensical. Data surmised by her tone, however, that she was admonishing the Munchkins in some fashion.

There suddenly came a loud sound from above. Data looked up to see a small ship about to crash near the village. He attempted to alert to the Munchkins to move out of its trajectory, but found that the louder he tried to speak, the more quiet his voice became.

As he pondered this strange effect, the ship crashed nose-first into the park, squishing the elderly woman in what he calculated must have been a lethal blow. Data blinked at the ship in confusion as he realised it was a miniature version of an Aerie class starship. He moved around to inspect the craft and saw USS KANSAS printed on the crumpled nose region.

“Hm,” he said, and then set about determining if there were any crew members in need of assistance. He reached out to the ship with the intent of locating an entry point, but as he touched it, the entire thing transformed to a small, wooden house. “Intriguing,” he said, taking a step back.

The front door opened and a young woman came out, dressed exactly as Dorothy had been in the movie, except that it was not Judy Garland portraying the character. It was Anna.

Data watched silently as Anna-Dorothy repeated the next scenes of the movie verbatim, neither she nor anybody else taking note of his presence. That is, until the Munchkins and Glinda escorted Anna-Dorothy further into town and a voice behind him said, “Well, Carlos, what have we here, then?”

Data turned to see the Captain there, still dressed as Dixon Hill. He looked down at himself; he was still in uniform. “Captain, I am unsuitably dressed,” he said.

“Captain? What Captain? What, you think they’re going to hire me and promote me up over at the station? Not likely. Come on,” he said, gesturing for Data to follow him over to the crashed house. “We have a case!”

“Sir? I mean...Dix?”

Picard-Hill squatted beside the house, withdrew a pen from inside his suit, and began poking at the curled remains of the Wicked Witch of the East’s toes under the house’s edge. “A murder for certain, but we need to determine if it’s more than just that.”

“Such as?” Data asked.

“Political assassination,” Picard-Hill said with a grin and excited gleam in his eye.

As Picard-Hill began to rattle off the details of the political intrigue — many of which made no logical sense even within a fictional context and in fact sounded more like random excerpts of his own internal files regarding the warp core replacement — Data turned to notice Anna-Dorothy passing behind him on the yellow brick road. He wanted to join her before she headed out of the village, but did not believe it would be wise to bring the Captain along in case Anna would be frightened by his presence even in this dream version.

Instead, he watched Anna go by — seemingly oblivious to his or the Captain’s presence in any form — and noted that she appeared to be happy. He turned back to the Captain who was still recounting an incoherent tale, and noted the Captain also appeared to be quite delighted in this strange combination of adventures.

Data decided this was a highly satisfactory result for two people he cared about. He woke, opened his eyes, sat up in his bed, and decided this result constituted a “good dream”.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stardate 47222.6 (Monday 23/03/2370, 06:05) — Main Engineering

For the first time since coming aboard, Anna couldn't sneak down the Jefferies tube into main engineering without encountering anyone else. The entire area — including decks above and below the drive — was a hive of activity of groups of engineers getting ready for their assigned stations.

Anna looked around at the throng and excitedly sang under her breath, "*Do you want to build a warp drive?*" just as another Anna had sung about building a snowman.

She had little to do until the physical components were all in place much later in the day, at which point she'd be performing installation and optimisation checks along various points of the plasma manifolds and related power transfer conduits. A key component of her contribution to the new drive's design was utilising the interphasic welding of these parts to make for a stronger unit that could withstand creation of the asymmetrical peristaltic warp fields further away from the nacelles and back to the intermix chamber in the first place, reducing the energy output and lowering peak transitional thresholds as a result.

Previous drive configurations — including the current one on the Enterprise being replaced — risked damaging the dilithium crystal with such a paradigm, but Anna's computations and modifications to the Baltimore engine had proved it could work, although the crystal did need a new shape for aligning the matter and anti-matter streams. That was why Starbase 84 was providing them not only with the new interphasic-welded conduits, but also a new dilithium crystal and a whole new drive housing to optimise it as well.

Thus, Anna would stay out of the way while engineering crews from both the starbase and Enterprise worked together to get all of the new elements on board and in place, and then she'd help with post-installation setup and testing.

Anna smiled to herself a little at the notion that she'd still be on board when the Enterprise left the starbase. *Actually I would've stayed on board for a bit anyway just to make sure it all stays working since they'll impulse a safe distance away from the station before fully engaging the new warp drive, but it feels good to have decided to not get off at the next stop either,* she thought.

Commander Riker's voice suddenly came over the whole ship's comms to announce, *"Attention all hands, docking with the Starbase 84 construction frame will commence in four minutes. Please stand clear of both docking ports on Deck Twenty-Five. That's both ports, everyone. Loading crews only to the port port, those exiting to the frame will do so at the starboard port. Bridge out."*

Several engineers around her repeated, "Port port," in jest amidst their ebullient conversation. But the sound of the Commander's voice made Anna cringe and reconsider being outside of her quarters or lab until needed.

Before she could think about heading back up the tube, however, Aisling called to her from the other side of the room. "Anna! Good! There you are! Come on!" she said, beckoning towards the main entrance to engineering, which was far wider than usual as the status panel wall had been shifted out of the way to accommodate the imminent arrival of the new matter/antimatter reaction chamber, more commonly known as the M/ARC. The old drive would be removed out of the base of the ship using a non-emergency version of the jettison mechanism, and some parts of the new one would be inserted from below using the same method in reverse, but the M/ARC would be much more gently handled on levitating cargo pallets. Or, as Geordi had written it into everybody's duty notices, "Lovingly carried in on the wings of magical warp doves."

Aisling wove her way through the crowded room to Anna's side with Andrea close behind. "Come on," she repeated. "Let's get up to the shuttle bay."

"Shuttle bay?" Anna asked.

"Yeah. Most folks heading over to the station will go to the frame by the walkway but then queue up to transport to the station itself. Takes forever. Lieutenant Choi says we can ride with her by shuttlepod over because she's delivering a crate of something biologically sensitive to someone on the station that can't be beamed, so I've pre-logged us with her."

Anna shook her head nervously. "I...I don't like going to the saucer section."

"I know," Aisling said patiently. "But I've checked the list of everyone taking a shuttle over and no senior command staff are on it. I also checked less than five minutes ago and they're all still on the bridge, which means even if they're going to take a shuttle — which is unlikely because they get priority beaming and can still use the on-board transporters for the next hour until those are shut down for maintenance, unlike everyone else who has to use the frame's pads — they'd have to take time to log out a shuttle. Which means if we hurry up and go now, we'll be out of there before any of them have gotten out of their comfortable bridge seats." She clasped her hands in front of her chin and added, "I know how you feel, and like I keep telling you, I've got your back. Trust a security expert to keep you safe, okay?" Aisling's brow furrowed. "You do want to go over to the station, right?"

"Um, sure? As long as I don't get left there," Anna said, twisting her fingers together.

Aisling chuckled. "Somehow I don't think Geordi's leaving without you gazing adoringly at the new engine along with him."

Anna nodded somewhat reluctantly but followed Aisling and Andrea out.

They managed their way through the crowd to the turbolift. Once inside, Andrea said, "I can't wait to go watch the interphasic

process in action from the station's viewing deck. You made it sound so fascinating in your talk."

Anna brightened up at the dual notion of watching the process — even though she'd seen it before — and the memory of her success in that presentation. "I like watching it too."

"Great, and then I'm taking you two to the El-Aurian restaurant in the top ring because they have a soufflé selection that'll make you think you've discovered heaven on a plate."

"It's a shame Mack can't join us," Andrea said.

"She's in her glory helping with the heavy goods transfer," Aisling replied. "Hopefully there'll be time for all of us to hang out at the station at some point. If not, at least once we get underway again and the new engine is up and running, we'll all be back to normal schedules and have more time to socialise together. Have you met Mack, Anna?"

"Oh, yes, briefly. Sort of. A little," she answered awkwardly, recalling the odd encounter she'd had in Cargo Bay Twelve when replicating floor panels for testing her Jefferies tube accessibility devices that had become known as whiteslides.

The turbolift opened directly into the starboard side of the shuttle bay. Aisling stepped out first and pointed across the way towards the bay door. "See? There's Seo-Yun, right and ready. We'll be out of here in no time, promise."

Anna was nonetheless tentative in her exit of the lift, carefully searching all around as she stepped out.

Andrea asked, "Have you ever seen the shuttle bay before? It feels huge compared to everywhere else on board, doesn't it?"

"I've been here once with Data. He took me in a shuttle to see a nacelle when we were docked at Starbase 247."

"And you weren't scared of command staff then?" Andrea asked with a concerned expression.

No because I thought that jerk Captain was dead at the time, Anna thought bitterly, but knew she couldn't say such a thing out loud. Instead she carefully replied, "It was just...different, I suppose." She caught herself wishing Picard was still dead because

of the relief that would give her in terms of remaining aboard; but as much as she loathed him, wishing someone dead felt wrong and made her feel sick with shame.

Aisling called, "Come on, lolly-gaggers, let's go!"

Anna put on a smile as best she could and hurried over to the shuttle with Andrea.

The tall, blue-uniformed Lieutenant nodded curtly as they entered; Anna wasn't sure if that was politeness or a sign that they were imposing. Desperate to appease those around her to assuage the turmoil she felt inside herself, she reflexively dipped in a curtsy and said, "I beg your pardon for our thumbing a hitch. It's awfully kind of you to let us come."

Choi looked confused. "For your what?"

"Um, thumbing a hitch," Anna repeated. "It means asking for a ride. I had to look it up myself when I first heard it to learn what it meant but...I suppose that's another phrase nobody uses anymore."

Choi shook her head, clearly still baffled. "Whatever. Just sit down. I need to get this stuff over there," she said as she sat in the main pilot seat and began the launch sequence.

Aisling took the other front seat while Anna and Andrea each sat on one of the side benches behind. Between them sat a crate on a dolly marked with biohazard and other laboratory warnings.

Andrea gave it a worried look that she then shared with Anna. "This box is safe, right?"

As the shuttlecraft lifted off, Choi acerbically asked, "Why? You planning to open it and lick the contents, Ensign Tyler?"

Andrea quickly responded, "No sir, of course not sir."

"Then it's safe," Choi muttered.

Anna mouthed, "Lick?!" to Andrea just as Aisling turned to glance at them.

Aisling laughed and mock-whispered, "Don't worry about it. Biologists are a bit freaky."

"Not half as much as weirdo engineers," Choi grumbled as she neatly piloted the shuttlecraft towards an open bay on one of the station's lower decks.

Anna cringed and wondered why she'd even left her quarters at all.

But Aisling poked Choi in the shoulder and said, "Seo-Yun, they're taking you seriously. Play nice."

All of a sudden the biologist laughed, then wrinkled her nose, turned to Anna and Andrea, poked out her tongue playfully, then turned back to guide the shuttlecraft to a gentle landing in the bay.

As they all rose, Aisling asked, "What's in the box, anyway?"

Seo-Yun laughed again, said, "Something tasty!", activated the door to open, and then shooed them all out ahead of her.

Anna eagerly hurried away. As the three of them walked towards the internal door, she asked, "Did we offend her?"

Aisling snorted. "No, she's being a goof. You need to stop taking people so seriously, Anna!"



Stardate 47222.7 (Monday 23/03/2370, 06:35) — Starbase 84

Aisling logged them all into the starbase and then expertly guided Anna and Andrea to the large deck on the lower side of the upper ring that looked down over various floating starship maintenance frames and other facilities that were required to be kept a safe distance from the base itself.

While Starbase 84 had internal bays capable of holding up to twelve of the enormous Galaxy class ships for minor maintenance and repair — plus dozens more smaller ships — anything that used either high-security or experimental technology was restricted to the external frames to maintain tighter control and safety standards. Because Starbase 84 had started off as an experimental hotbed with such controls in place, it had attracted more and more scientists eager to set up shop and take advantage of the base's massive facilities. It even contained a full branch office of the Daystrom Institute. Research that couldn't find room on Earth's Spacedock

was regularly farmed out here despite being at the edge of Federation space with Romulan territory protruding between the two.

Aisling had worked a security tour cycle on Starbase 84 when she was fresh out of the Academy, so she knew all the fastest ways to get everywhere while minimising crowds. She wanted to hurry them along not just to try to grab some of the comfortable seats by the windows that overlooked the interphasic facility, but for Anna's sake to minimise encountering anyone Anna didn't like.

So as long I stick to lower-deck style routes, upper-deck type folks shouldn't be a problem, she thought as she loaded them all into yet another turbolift through the more industrial parts of the base. And if someone like Covett comes along, I can scare him away myself.

They arrived at the observation area and Aisling brought them to set of padded lounge benches that offered a direct view to the interphasic facility below.

"See?" she said, pointing to the seats. "Do I know the best places on this station or what?"

"Oh this is good," Andrea said appreciatively as she sat down. "You going to bring Aoife here?"

"The school is taking the kids on a tour of the station. The older ones are being taken to the bio-neural gel research floor, and the younger ones are going to the magnetic research lab," Aisling explained as they all began to peer at the floating frames below.

"I bet she'll like that," Andrea replied.

Aisling scoffed. "No, she's jealous that she can't go to the bio-neural stuff."

"To be honest, so am I," Anna said.

Aisling laughed. "You probably could talk your way in."

Anna shrugged but then nodded.

Aisling continued, "Aoife tried to plead her case for why magnets are apparently 'boring' and why she should get to go with the older kids since she'd managed to read most of the information the older ones got about the basic bio-gel concepts. Unfortunately

for her, she let slip that she really wanted to stick her hands in some to see if it'd make her 'think faster' so that turned the whole concept into a hard 'no'."

They all laughed together, and then Andrea said, "I should get her to explain it to me!" She sighed somewhat sadly and added, "It always takes me so many times hearing a concept to get it to stick in my head. Maybe I need to put my hands in the gel, if that works!"

"I am fairly certain it doesn't," Anna replied with a grin.

"Okay, but tell me your bucket thing again," Andrea asked.

"Bucket thing?"

"From your talk, your analogy about how this interphasic-welded stuff means better buckets, or something. Like I said, I need to hear these things more than once."

"Oh that, sure," Anna replied. "So you know how standard warp drives mix matter and antimatter in the dilithium crystal to create plasma that's then shunted through the power transfer conduits to the nacelles, where it is then separated into pulses to control the speed and direction of the ship?"

"Yep, I'm solid on that part," Andrea said confidently.

"Right, so imagine you're standing in the nacelle and instead of plasma, it's a hose of water, super pressurised, coming at you full force all the time, but in order to make the nacelles do their job you have to separate out that flow into smaller buckets and distribute them along the nacelle according to the speed and direction demanded by the bridge."

"Okay, yeah, I remember that part because that sounds terrifying!"

Anna laughed lightly, "Well, yeah, it would be, but luckily we don't manually haul buckets, we let the PTCs handle it for us. But if you were doing it with water, imagine how much easier it'd be if the hose gave you pulses of water that were determined way back up the line at the intermix chamber, and both you and the intermix chamber knew what the bridge's pulse request was, so you knew to

expect those pulses coming and you had more time to pick up each bucket in sequence and get it where it needs to be.”

“That...would be a lot less stressful,” Andrea said thoughtfully.

“Right, and it means whomever is operating the other end of the hose doesn’t just have to open it full-bore the whole time; they can control it more carefully on their end too, so the water-pressure management is better the whole way along. It takes a bit more thought and planning on their side, but less overall energy. I mean the analogy gets kind of stretchy at that point, to be honest.”

“No, no, I get it a bit better now. That’s what you meant with the peak transitional threshold thing, that’s your big contribution, right?”

“Yeah. I worked out some math and programming stuff that showed that the amount of energy needed to push past each warp factor threshold didn’t need to be as high if you have better plasma management end-to-end.”

“But that would normally break the crystal,” Aisling said.

“Yes. And the intermix chamber and the standard PTCs. They weren’t originally built to handle it. Think of it like a hose is normally just turned on at the source and that’s that, but now you’re asking someone to turn it off and on and off and on and off and on.”

“Stress on the tap,” Aisling said.

“Exactly. And thumpy water waves going smash, smash, smash through a hose not built to take that.”

“Okay, now I remember that’s when you said the interphasic welding helps,” Andrea said with a smile.

“Yes. I had to use my weird trellium C/D stuff to make it work on the Baltimore, but it was a bit shoddy and still has a lot of procedural problems.”

“Like massive toxicity to Vulcans,” Aisling said.

“Well, sort of. The C/D stuff isn’t as bad but synthesising it does take some D which is nasty for them so it’s best avoided. Luckily, the interphasic welding replaces the need for the trellium. Once we’ve got PTCs able to take that slamming action all the way

up the line, we can use the software side to more efficiently regulate the whole thing, making the warp engine more responsive, more efficient, and more able to readily transfer power to the rest of the ship aside from plasma to the nacelles. I'm pretty sure the reason Geordi wants me to stick around is to keep researching more and more on improving ship-wide power with the new drive."

"That and he respects you as an expert and a colleague and a friend and everything else, Anna," Aisling said firmly. "Like we all do."

"Well...gosh...okay," Anna said awkwardly but with an enormous smile. Clearly happy in her element, she went on, "Like I said in the speech, the interphasic-welded parts combine an ancient sort of slip-forming with being slammed in and out of dimensional phase so that instead of two pieces being stuck together and a weak join between, they're all formed as one piece from the start with rapid return to original shape during elastic deformation and reduced plastic deformation to minimize gaps and material fatigue, all while maintaining enough overall flexibility to avoid becoming brittle under both stress and strain."

"Yes, that part I remember because I enjoyed the Academy classes on material physics," Andrea said. "It was the pulse thing that was confusing me but I think I get it now. But I do have another question about —"

"Ah, there is the little genius!" came a loud voice from behind them with a thick German accent. "I have been waiting for you! I knew I would find you up here!"

The three all turned to see a short, thin woman of Asian descent with long, dark hair coming at Anna with her arms outstretched.

Aisling quickly realised three things: one, that she'd forgotten Anna had also worked on this station as part of the interphasic team and probably hadn't need to be guided around at all in the first place; two, that the woman's tone had a distinctly condescending edge that wasn't fully masked by the faux friendliness; and three, that Anna was already cringing with her

fists balled up in front of her as if she expected to have to defend herself from an unwanted embrace.

Aisling leapt to her feet to put on her own mask of diplomatic greeting and said, “Hello! Are you a friend of Anna’s as well?”

The other woman shot Aisling a brief look of derision, but then laughed and said, “Yes, yes, of course! Who is not a friend of Anna’s?” She continued towards Anna with arms out, but then laughed again. “Ah, right, yes, no hugs! Not with the touching, hm?” She dropped her arms and said to Aisling, “She does not like with the touching. She will hit you with a sandwich if you try!” She then burst into more laughter, doubling over with it.

Aisling watched as Anna’s expression shifted from panic to fury, but with a heavy layer of shame over the whole thing.

“Sandwich?” Andrea asked Anna tentatively.

Aisling tried to gesture to Andrea not to poke Anna any more than this unpleasant woman was already doing, but Andrea didn’t notice.

“Yes, yes,” the lady said. “Her first day at Daystrom in Okinawa, have you not heard? Our little genius comes along and all is well until she is taken into the dining area and Dr. Tiedemann comes up behind her and tries to grab her arm, making that voice men make when they think they are cute but they are not cute, you know?” She wrinkled up her nose and said in a smarmy tone, “Hey there sweetheart, you are new here, eh?”

“Ew,” Andrea said.

“Yes, ew! Our little genius, she has a sandwich in her hand, she smash it into his face like so,” the lady said as she mimed a full-arm swing. “We call it the club sandwich now!” she said with more laughter.

“Sorry, who are you?” Aisling asked with her diplomatic smile still on but in an unmistakably authoritative tone.

The woman feigned offense for a moment, then playfully admonished Anna, “What, you have not told your friends about your beloved team here?”

Anna slowly rose to her feet, her eyes fluctuating between cowed and an icy glare, and coldly said, “Dr. Sara Kiyohira heads the interphasic research team here. These are my friends Ensign Andrea Tyler and Lieutenant Aisling Navarro.” She finished with the slightest little dip of a curtsy, as if it was a reflexive bit of deference she didn’t really want to give.

Completely oblivious to the tension, Andrea stepped forward to shake Dr. Kiyohira’s hand and say, “Pleased to meet you!”

Aisling gritted her teeth and likewise shook hands, watching as Anna took a careful step back out of range of having to do so herself, her balled fists turning into twisted fingers at her waist.

“Well you have picked a good viewing spot, so sit, sit,” Dr. Kiyohira said, taking another of the seats around the window. “Anyway, he deserved it, the schweinhund. But you take everything so seriously, Anna. You must learn to relax.”

Aisling stiffened, suddenly realising how unpleasant it must have been for Anna to hear such similar words from her as they’d left the shuttle. *No wonder she’s so damned nervous around new people all the time, if this is how she was habitually spoken to in previous work assignments*, she thought. *Shit, I need to ease up and make it easier for her come out of her shell, not try to pry it open for her.*

Kiyohira continued to prattle on about the interphasic team and its research, pointing to the process underway at the frame in view below, and repeatedly referring to Anna with that “little genius” moniker. It was clear to Aisling that it came from a place of forced acknowledgement of Anna’s accomplishments but missing the respect that should accompany it. It was also clear that Anna hated the nickname, because she visibly flinched each time it was used, which made it even worse that Kiyohira would continue it.

There’s no way she’s failing to notice Anna’s reaction, Aisling thought. *Sometimes these science types miss that kind of thing, but — ah there it goes again! Kiyohira sees Anna’s flinch and she grins ever so slightly at it. Wouldn’t blame Anna if she hit this one with a sandwich either. There’s an ugly little power game going on here,*

and if I had any idea of how to get into it and throw some of it back in Kiyohira's face, I would.

But the one time Aisling managed to catch Anna's eye, she could tell in an instant that Anna didn't want an intervention. She wanted this interaction over, not prolonged. She barely spoke beyond simple acknowledgements of Kiyohira's stories and scientific information, and mostly kept her eyes downward at the interphasic facility.

Aisling was in the midst of trying to come up with a reason to drag Andrea and Anna away when all of a sudden something in the distance along the deck caught Anna's eye, and her whole body unclenched. She even smiled slightly and waved the fingers of her right hand.

Aisling turned to follow Anna's eyeline; Data was standing further down the gallery, smiling and waving gently at Anna. Aisling tried to wave politely at Data as well, hoping that might encourage him to come over, but he was so fixated on Anna that he didn't seem notice Aisling at all.

Wait, are they...flirting? No, that can't be. I don't think either of them even understands how. But...wow, the effect he has on her. It's like when she looked at him to keep herself calm during her speech; something about him gives her strength. That's absolutely beautiful, she thought.

"But anyway, you must all be in need of a decent meal, yes?" Kiyohira asked. "Perhaps we all go find some sandwiches?" She laughed derisively again.

However, this time Anna turned to her, sat up straighter with no trace of embarrassment left, and coldly asked, "How are you all getting on with translations between the dispersion-strengthening standard versus the new methodology? Did Dr. Cortez send you my latest calculations to fix the team's lingering errors?"

A flash of fire went through Kiyohira's eyes. Her next laugh was quite bitter behind her vicious grin. "Oh yes. That little set. It was...helpful. Thank you."

Anna also smiled — a scorchingly polite and frankly unsettling little thing that Aisling hoped never to see directed at herself. “Dr. Cortez said it helped entirely overhaul the woznium carbmolybdenide issue in the MRI.”

“I would not say ‘entirely,’” Kiyohira replied.

“She did. But then — as you’ve told me so many times — I don’t always understand the power dynamics of research teams, so maybe she just wanted me to think her work is once again about to replace yours.” Anna shrugged as if entirely mystified by her own words, while staring daggers directly at the scientist.

Kiyohira maintained her furious grin and stood. “Yes, well, do come over and see the lab later if you have time, little genius. You know how much we all love having you visit.”

“I’ll see if I have time. The Federation flagship has me pretty busy these days.”

Holy hellfire and all damnation as my Granny would say, Aisling thought, barely able to restrain herself from bursting into applause. *Why do people keep thinking they can mess with Anna? Oh but that’s it, isn’t it? She’s smarter than any of them and the petty ones can’t stand it.*

Kiyohira wrinkled her nose in a faux playful expression, turned, and left.

Aisling leaned over to Anna — who was frigidly watching Kiyohira walk away — and said, “Why do I get the feeling that was a long time coming?”

Anna turned to her, shrugged, nodded, and in a much softer voice replied, “It was. It really, really was.”

Then Anna’s gaze went back across the deck, where Data was still watching as Geordi came up alongside him. Anna beamed a huge smile of triumph in his direction. Data flashed his own friendly smile at her, then turned to speak with Geordi.

“Okay then,” Aisling said carefully. “Who’s up for brunch soufflés?”

“Anything but a sandwich,” Anna said as she stood.

The three laughed together, all in kind support with no derision whatsoever. *As real friends do it*, Aisling thought as they headed off.



Stardate 47222.7 (Monday 23/03/2370, 07:20) — Starbase 84

Geordi had left the initial equipment phase in the capable hands of his engineers so he could go over to the station and quickly confirm some procedural aspects with the teams there. Then — knowing he had a bit of time to spare before his more official meeting between several groups from both sides — he decided to do as many of the engineering crew were doing and go up to the observation deck. His VISOR gave him spectacular views of the interphasic process and he never missed an opportunity to enjoy it.

When he arrived on the deck that overlooked the various external frames, he saw Data near the outer windows, but instead of looking out, he was standing in that stiff, mannequin-like way he had when he was observing something of interest and not concerned about maintaining a more human-like pose.

Geordi was about to approach to ask him what he was looking at when Data lifted a hand and waved to someone. Geordi scanned the distant curve of the deck to see who it could be, and then wasn't surprised to discover Anna across the way with Andrea and Aisling and someone vaguely familiar that he couldn't immediately name.

He stood and watched as Data resumed his static, observing posture for a short time, then sighed, put his hands on his hips, and decided it was time to talk to his friend about whatever was going on with him.

But as he approached, Data suddenly smiled widely and waved at Anna again. Geordi turned and could see Anna doing likewise, and her face was hot. *Is she blushing? No wait, that's...anger? Not*

at Data, obviously. What the hell is going on? Aisling looks furious, that's for damned sure.

He then noticed Andrea was looking at him in that lovesick way she'd been doing a lot lately, so he quickly turned and pretended not to have seen any of them. *Bad enough I've got to deal with Data's crush. I don't even know what to do about Tyler's, he thought with an inward groan.*

"Hey Data?" he said as he came to stand at his friend's side.

Data turned to him with a polite expression, as always. "Yes Geordi?"

"What are you doing?"

Data pointed to the large window. "I am observing several construction projects."

"Mmhm. Anything else?"

"I have also been noting other members of the crew doing so. There is a great deal of interest."

Geordi let out a long, slow breath. "Right. Um, Data, we need to talk about your crush on Anna."

Data's brow furrowed for a moment as he asked, "Crush?" Then it lifted as he said, "Ah, you mean as in infatuation, a love interest, puppy love, to hold a torch for —"

"Yeah, yeah, Data. All of that."

Data's brow furrowed again. "I do not have such interests."

"Are you sure? Because the way you've been looking at her lately —"

"I am incapable of such emotions."

"Right but...what if it's not so impossible?" Geordi theorised, hoping to get Data to see that his behaviour of late wasn't usual even for him.

Data dispassionately replied, "Even if it was possible — which it is not — I would not act on any such inclination because Anna has clearly stipulated she does not wish to be approached in such a manner."

"Right, that's why I figured we should talk about it. I mean it isn't necessarily a bad thing, if carefully managed, but —"

“I have no intention of behaving in any way that would risk either offence or harm for her.”

Geordi was beginning to feel bad for having brought it up, but remained convinced Data was unaware of the implications of his own actions. “I know. But sometimes when we develop feelings for someone, we do things we wouldn’t normally do. Behave in ways we’d usually...you know...condemn.” Geordi gulped away his own residual guilt for having let his own crush on Dr. Brahms go to far. He’d not only botched it with her by overstepping boundaries, he’d made it worse by pressuring her to forgive him for it. He had issued more apologies for that after the fact, but was never sure if Leah’s apparent forgiveness was real or just a screen to make him leave her alone. On Troi’s advice, he’d ceased all direct communications with Leah, but his guilt remained.

“I have observed that proclivity in others,” Data said.

“Right,” Geordi replied, unsure if Data meant him or not.

“However, I remain unable to experience those feelings,” Data explained again.

Geordi sighed. “Data, you’ve been staring at her, watching her.”

Data nodded. “I have been ensuring she is safe and happy, and concerned when she is unhappy. A few moments ago she appeared unhappy, but it seems that Lieutenant Navarro and Ensign Tyler are comforting her.”

“Okay, but yesterday afternoon in engineering —”

“I was trying to understand why she is terrified of airlocks.”

“Why she’s...what? Airlocks?!”

Data explained, “On our way to the photon torpedo area on Deck Twenty-Five, Anna experienced a visceral negative reaction to the presence of the docking ports. Apparently, she is terrified of airlocks.”

“Why?” Geordi asked, astonished.

“I am uncertain. I did not wish to upset her further by asking. Instead, I continued to observe her closely during our work and then when we returned to main engineering, watching for signs of distress or if she wished to communicate further about the topic. It

has been my observation that when humans exhibit an illogical fear, it can be quite difficult for them to articulate it. I ensured that I remained available to multiple potential results of her exposure to something that had frightened her.”

Geordi was completely taken aback by this new information, and forced to re-evaluate his assumptions. *Maybe I was just projecting my own issues onto him after all?* he wondered. Somewhat embarrassed by this realisation, he said, “Oh. So you were just trying to figure out how to help her.”

“Yes. Anna presents a curious collection of unusual emotions and reactions. I find myself very intrigued, but also highly concerned that she be kept safe and comfortable.”

Geordi nodded. “Okay. Yeah. I want that for her too.”

Data nodded back.

But then something else occurred to Geordi. “What about the movie?”

Data’s brow furrowed again. “Do you mean *The Wizard of Oz*?”

“Yeah.”

“I enjoyed watching it with her and observing her reactions to it. She clearly emulates the main character in several of her unique speech patterns. I believe a story of a girl wishing to get home has resonated with her throughout her lifetime.

“Right, but wasn’t it kind of like...a date?”

Data appeared baffled by the suggestion. “I do not believe so. She did invite you along as well.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Geordi admitted.

“I did not detect any romantic intention on her part throughout the screening. I am certain she simply wished for the company of one or more friends, to share something meaningful with others who may enjoy it as well. I had no romantic intent either.”

“Um okay,” Geordi conceded. “I guess I misinterpreted. Sorry.”

“There is no need to apologise. I wish I was capable of having a crush, albeit on someone who would not be at risk of distress from it.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Geordi said, feeling terrible for suggesting it at all.

But then Data admitted, “I have noticed some strange thought processes lately, so I have run several self-diagnostics but been able to detect no malfunction or error. I have, however, noted that these strange thoughts may coincide with the recent initiation of my dream program.”

Suddenly Data’s strange behaviour of late made a lot more sense to Geordi. “Oh, right!” he said, relieved to discover a reason for his gut feeling that something weird was going on. “How’s that going?”

“As I said, strange. The images and narratives are often incomprehensible.”

Geordi nodded along eagerly. “Yeah. That’s dreaming, all right.”

“If the thoughts remained in the dreams, that would make more logical sense,” Data said, with a concerned expression.

“Wait, are you having some dream stuff cross over into waking thoughts?”

“Possibly. I am uncertain and still evaluating all available information.”

“Well, dreams can do that to you. Okay. That makes a lot more sense, now that you mention it.” He chuckled with relief. *Not that I’d mind if Anna and Data got together, but I’m pretty sure neither of them are ready for it, and I need everything to stay calm with everyone avoiding drama while we get this drive installed,* he thought. *If they want to develop a thing for each other later — now that she’s staying on board — that’s fine. For now, let’s just keep everyone happy and functional.* “Once we get this drive thing sorted, I can help you run some more diagnostics, if you want.”

“Thank you,” Data replied. “I believe it is of little consequence for now, but if the dreams become problematic I will seek your advice.”

“Yeah, man, I’m here for you. Anytime. You know that.”

“I do. Thank you.” Data then returned his gaze to the seats where Anna and the others had been sitting — now occupied by other people.

Geordi said, “Just like you’re being there for her. Got it.”

Data nodded. Geordi patted his friend on the back and said, “Ready to get back to work?”

Data nodded again, so they headed back to the frame where the Enterprise was docked.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Stardate 47223.1 (Monday 23/03/2370, 10:15) — Starbase 84

Picard left a dull yet reasonably congenial meeting with several senior command staff from the station in a relatively good mood until he noted the time and realised he was due to meet with Troi. He sighed, adjusted his uniform, and headed for the room she'd listed on his calendar.

When he arrived, the door opened to a lush, overly blue and purple room with a view almost directly towards the frame where the Enterprise was docked.

"Hello, Captain," Troi greeted warmly.

"Hello, Counselor." Looking around at the multiple soft, fluffy furnishings, he chuckled, "I can see why you'd choose this room."

"I chose it knowing you'd be able to see your ship out the windows," she said. "But yes, this happens to be my preferred colour palette. However, I could've chosen the one next door which also gives a good view of the ship. It's the same decor in pink, yellow, and orange."

Picard cringed.

Troi laughed gently. "Exactly. I knew you wouldn't mind these colours, but you'd have been on edge the whole time in the other one."

"I prefer the more subdued colours of the Enterprise," he said as he took a seat. He made a face, pulled out a plush, puffy cushion from behind himself, tossed it to another nearby chair, and settled in more comfortably.

"What sort of colours were around you in your childhood home?" she asked as she sat opposite him and began to pour from the tea service she had waiting on the table.

She's going right into it, he thought. No point in fighting the basics, I suppose. "More or less what you'd expect in an historical

French countryside home: a lot of rich, wooden tones, deep reds and blues, shelves lined with a multitude of brown, green, and grey antique books.”

“Mmhm,” she said as she handed him his tea, exactly as he liked it. “What about your favourite room?”

“Favourite?” The image of a painted-glass gazebo flew through his mind, but he immediately banished it. “Well that depends on my age, really.”

“Of course,” she said indulgently. “But if you could replicate a room from that house on board the ship as a retreat, a safe space for you to enjoy, what room would it be? What would that look like?”

Picard sighed, genuinely trying to think of a satisfactory answer. Eventually he conceded, “Honestly, I would not wish for any room from that house to be aboard. While I did enjoy the nostalgia of my visit a few years ago and my brother and I have continued to reconcile these last years over correspondence, I’m quite happy to let him have the lot of it. My favourite place is the one you strategically placed right in front of me, there,” he said, nodding towards the Enterprise out the window.

“You prefer the places that are away from home.”

“No, Counselor, that is my home,” he said, more emphatically pointing towards the ship. “I haven’t thought about the Picard chateau as ‘home’ in decades. You wanted me to talk more about my time on that mercenary vessel a couple of months ago? Well I’ll tell you, the whole time I was there I yearned for home: my quarters, my ready room, my bridge. That’s home.” *Maybe she’ll take the bait and let me talk about the events on that ship instead,* he thought.

Instead she flatly said, “Captain, we need to talk about your relationship with your father.”

Picard winced, unable to contain it.

“I know you don’t like this topic,” she said more gently. “I’m not trying to get you to go on any deep dives today. I’m going to

let you skirt around the edges, but this is important. Now more than ever.”

Picard sighed again and sipped his tea.

Troi set hers on the table and adopted her usual therapist’s pose. “I’m quite certain that the pain you carry around from your childhood is part of your animosity towards children in general.”

He defensively retorted, “I’ve gotten much better about that.” *Especially because of Meribor and Batai*, he thought, not wanting to have to go down that memory path very much either.

“Yes, you have. You’ve grown tremendously both as a Captain and as a man. But there’s still so much more to discover about yourself and what better opportunity than a young person possibly coming into your life? Especially since I know it’s your strong intent to do better than your father did.”

Picard chuckled. “That is a very low bar.”

“Perhaps it is. Then let’s make sure you’re well above it.”

“Hm.”

“This topic is an important one for you under any circumstances, as it is for anybody, even those who have had positive relationships with their parents. If there’s a chance that you are now a father, it’s imperative that we deal with this together in a calm, safe, supportive way before there’s any sort of crisis in the future.”

Picard’s brow furrowed in concern. “Are you anticipating a crisis?”

Troi tilted her head to the side and raised an eyebrow. “Captain, on the Enterprise it’s wise to always be prepared for a crisis.”

Picard pressed his lips together and reluctantly grunted his agreement. But when she continued to look at him expectantly, he set his own cup on the table before him, adjusted his uniform again, and said, “Fine then, Counselor, but there’s little to say about my father that I haven’t already told you. He was a bully and he had Robert as his lieutenant, both of them making it quite clear that I was not one of the pack, as it were. He had his way of doing things and there was to be no questioning, no progression nor

change, nothing the least bit open-minded for anybody or anything. He didn't approve of me going to Starfleet but honestly he wouldn't have approved of me staying and trying to be a vintner either.

"As I've told you before, there's nothing I could have done to please that man, and I am at peace with the decisions I've made for myself. I no longer worry about what he would have thought because it doesn't matter. I'm my own man, and he was his, and that's just the way things are," Picard declared.

She kept up the expectant look for more, but he lifted his chin slightly, ever so defiantly, indicating that he was done.

Troi smiled. "That place of peace is a good one for you."

"Yes it is," Picard replied.

"On many levels, it's useful and no doubt comforting."

"Yes it — wait, on many levels?" he asked suspiciously.

"It's a common and practical mental place for many in command."

Picard frowned.

Troi continued, "But it's also the sort of comfortable place that results in many in command having difficulty in their own parenting."

Picard countered, "Command track training includes classes specific to separating professional and family life for that very reason."

"It does. But like most of our Academy training, it's one thing to practice it on campus using a script in a classroom and quite another out here where the scenarios don't match the text book. There's nothing in command training for dealing with the sort of situation you may be facing."

"We had to spend a whole afternoon talking about unexpected pregnancy!"

"But not adult children popping up out of the blue who have been through hell and need parental support. While mindfully closing the door on an acknowledged problem with a parent can be a positive step for some people, unfortunately it does not bode well

for those people's children. The dysfunction finds ways to leak out. Even in normal, healthy relationships, the new child still picks up on certain moods and behaviours of their parent. With no reference as to what's behind that closed door, the child will interpret anything that's wrong as being their fault, and a whole new generation of dysfunction is created. Often not as bad as the parent experienced in their own childhood — if, again, they have support and are working on their own issues — but there's still a handing down of problematic issues, intentionally or not."

"But that's just it. If Anna is mine and if I ever get to speak to her, I would never, ever treat her like my father treated me."

Troi smiled again, but it was the thin one she used when she wasn't really happy with an answer. "Yes, Captain, that's precisely my point. You'd go out of your way to be unlike your father, and in doing so, your child would know something was wrong and assume it was her fault."

Picard blinked, his heart sinking. "Oh. I see."

"All new parents go through the steps of recreating themselves to be a new person: a parent, a carer, a guardian, and a guide to this new life that is part of their own. And part of that is consciously deciding what sort of parent one wishes to be, drawing on what was good and bad about one's own upbringing."

"Well that's easy enough, then. My mother was a wonderful role model."

"And you should emulate her and the meaningful aspects of her parenting. But none of us can pretend that other role models didn't exist, including bad ones. They did exist. Anyone present in our young lives shaped us, so what I always tell parents who are struggling is that we need to not simply shut out the negative role models, but look at them, examine them, and take lessons from them. Unfortunately, sometimes the most vital lessons are the least comfortable ones."

I really do not want to do this, he thought. But whatever I put off now, she's just going to make happen later, and she's right

about getting through it calmly before anything goes wrong. He sighed again, but nodded at her to continue.

“All right. I’d like you to start by imagining that your father is coming into the room right now. Tell me what you think he’d do and say.”

Picard scoffed, “He’d take one look at this place, grunt, and leave.”

“He wouldn’t interact with you at all?”

“I might warrant a chastising glance.”

“Why would he chastise you?”

“For trusting a therapist of any sort. For speaking openly. For being on this station, out here in space. All of it, I’m sure.”

“All right, let’s change the location. Imagine you’re in a cafe, on Earth, not in uniform, and I’m not there. You’re just having your tea, and he walks in and sees you. What do you think he’d do next?”

Picard contemplated the scenario for a moment, drawing on his memory of the most popular cafe in the nearby town, trying to suss out his father’s likely responses. “He would...well it depends on his mood, I suppose.”

“Let’s assume a reasonably good mood.”

“Well then I’d probably get a polite nod and he’d go about his business.”

“Would he join you at your table?”

“Not unless he had a reason to, no.”

“You think he’d remain distanced.”

“Oh certainly, yes.”

“Is there anyone he would join?”

“I suppose if his vintner friends were there, he’d join them.”

“I see. And how does that make you feel?”

Picard shrugged. “As I said, I’ve accepted this. I’d be quite content with civility and then leave him to his business.”

“Mhm. That’s you as an adult. What would, say, seven year old Jean-Luc feel?”

“The obvious things: resentment, sorrow, anger, all of it. Counselor, I’d never treat someone else like that. Even with the ensigns, if I go into Ten Forward and they glance up at me I make sure to give them a pleasant smile as often as I can. I do try to make the effort to be personable even when I’m busy.”

“I know. It’s part of why they attach to you so readily. You’re very good at that.”

“Thank you,” he said somewhat defiantly, tugging down his shirt.

“But again, that’s you as an adult learning to do better and close that door. It’s fairly easy to be pleasant and civil under pleasant and civil circumstances.”

Picard nodded slowly. “So you’re saying if Anna was in Ten Forward it’d be a more difficult situation to simply pass her by with a smile. I acknowledge that. In fact I fully acknowledge the fact that I would be stopped in my tracks and be uncertain what to say or do. I think about it frequently, actually, how I might react in various situations should she turn up here or there.”

“Mmhm, I know. And I do want us to talk about that sort of thing at another time. But before we can do that, before you can have more solid footing to pre-imagine those sorts of conversations, we need to deal with your own paternal relationship. We’ll get back to the scenarios more like your real life in a moment. First, I want to take us back to the cafe. You’re your current age, sitting there with your tea, there are no vintners or other distractions in the cafe, just other random members of the public neither of you knows. Your father comes in. What do you wish he would say and do?”

Picard firmly repeated, “I really am fine with him giving me a pleasant nod and going away.”

“You’re fine with that. But in your heart, in your dearest fantasy of what life could have been like, what would you wish for from him?”

The idea of going into fantasy made him uncomfortable. He squirmed a little in his seat and reluctantly replied, “In a best-case scenario, it would be nice if he at least said, ‘Hello.’”

“And then?”

“And then...sat with me and talked, I suppose.”

“What sort of conversation?”

He laughed awkwardly. “Anything other than wine. Or grapes. Or barrels. Or vines. Or any topic he purports to know everything about.”

Troi nodded. “What about your career? Would you like him to talk to you about that?”

Picard shook his head with a wry laugh. “I don’t think that would go well.”

“But this is a fantasy.”

“I...” he began, but then grumbled under his breath. He sighed again, rubbing the back of his neck. “Do you know, I can’t even fantasise his interest in that. It’d be easier to imagine him with Andorian antennae.”

“All right, let me set up a different scenario and bring it back into that professional world where you’re more comfortable. Let’s imagine you’re at an event at Starfleet headquarters. It’s a very fine occasion, and there have been awards given out, including to you. You’ve been decorated in some way that you’re pleased with and proud of. And your team is all there at the event too, all of us. We’ve been cheering you on. It’s a good day by any measure.”

“And then what, I see him there?”

“Yes.”

“And you want to know what I wish he’d say and do?”

“Yes.”

Picard sat forward, took a deep breath, and rubbed his palms on his knees while looking at the floor. A lump was forming in his throat. “I don’t like this,” he admitted.

“I know. But you’re safe here. I’m with you. You are, in fact, surrounded by people who love and support you. And you still have the power to close that door whenever you need to. But

Captain, if I let you close it right now, you'll have this lingering over you for days, disrupting your sleep. So while we're here together, calm and safe, indulge me in this. Please."

Picard groaned, leaned to the side, and rubbed his forehead. "I think it's fairly obvious, isn't it?"

"I don't take anything for granted."

"Fine. I'll say it. I would want him to say he's proud of me. Of course I would. Anybody would. It's a fundamental drive in every human being to want their parents or carers to be proud of them, especially at their peak achievements."

Troi smiled warmly and leaned closer to him to catch his eyeline once more. "That's right," she said. "That's exactly right."

He let out a ragged breath and turned his gaze back to his beloved ship out the window. They were both quiet for a time as he got his emotions back in check. In doing so, he realised something. "Is the lesson here that no matter how angry you are or distanced you are from a parent, you still seek their approval on some level?"

"That's part of it, yes."

"So you believe that even though Anna won't speak to me, she craves my approval?"

"I don't know if she's aware of it herself, but yes, somewhere in her lies that need."

"And she's never likely had it from anyone, not even her own mother."

"From what her files say, no, she probably didn't."

"So you want me to imagine fantasy conversations with my father to prepare me for conversations with my possible daughter?"

"I think that would be a good foundation, don't you?"

"Not a very pleasant one," he said as he sat back in the chair, his hands gripping the arm rests.

"Not at first, but it's your mind. It's your mental playground. Make it what you want it to be, what you need it to be, and then go from there." She reached forward to put her hand gently on his arm. "And I'm here for you to help you with it, in any way that you need, whenever you need me."

Despite all of the anguish of the conversation, Picard could not help but soften his posture and tone. “Thank you,” he said sincerely.

With an enormous, warm smile, she replied, “Thank you, Captain, for taking the steps along with me.”



Stardate 47223.1 (Monday 23/03/2370, 10:25) — Starbase 84

After Anna, Aisling, and Andrea sampled a variety of scrumptious soufflés at the El-Aurian restaurant, Andrea was called back to the Enterprise for her team’s duties to start, so Aisling suggested Anna walk with her through the colourfully-lit commercial area alongside the restaurants.

“Had you eaten there before? When you were working on the station?” Aisling asked.

Anna shook her head. “Like I told you before, I’m only just learning to eat with other people around.”

“You did fine today.”

“Those smelled so good, I was able to ignore feeling weird about it. Besides, you and Andrea are nice to me. I still don’t like sharing meals with just anyone, but you two...apparently I can do that now. A bit,” Anna said with a nervous smile.

“Good. We all want you to be happy and comfortable.”

Anna nodded, but looked away.

“You okay?”

Anna put on a polite smile. “I’m fine.”

“No you’re not. If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine, but I can tell Kiyohira bothered you.”

The polite smile disappeared. “I suppose. She’s always like that. You get used to it.”

“Nobody should have to get used to being spoken to so disrespectfully.”

“Hm?” Anna grunted, not seeming to understand at first. But then she shrugged and said, “Well...I mean she keeps calling me a genius, so there’s that.”

“She calls you a ‘little genius’. Feels backhanded to me. You know what backhanded compliments are, right?”

“Um, yeah, like when someone says something that sounds nice but really it isn’t. Maybe she’s doing that, I don’t know. It’s hard to tell. I don’t like twisty-talk like that. But I think she does like my work. Sometimes. She and Dr. Cortez have confusing battles going on and whenever I tried to figure it all out, everyone told me I didn’t understand, and they’re right. A lot of what they did and said to each other didn’t make sense. I think sometimes she doesn’t like me because I’m on Dr. Cortez’s team? She sometimes called me ‘Raihana’s pet’ and I don’t think it was meant to be nice.”

“No, Anna, that’s not a nice thing to say about a person.”

“Yeah, I’m getting pretty good at telling the difference between nice tones and fake-nice tones. But...it’s hard. I don’t understand why people get angry at each other over scientific facts and mathematical proofs. If someone has more information that pertains to your work, shouldn’t that be a good thing?”

“It should, but people are people. They get territorial and egos get in the way.”

“I’m over-emotional a lot so I wouldn’t usually say this, but sometimes I think the Vulcans do this stuff better. You don’t see Vulcan science teams squabbling like human and Tellarite ones.”

Aisling laughed. “No, indeed, Tellarites and Vulcans are rarely best friends. Humans are somewhere in between, generally speaking.”

“It’s just...I don’t mind someone arguing with my work if there are problems with it. I like figuring out where parts have gone wrong. But I don’t understand why someone wouldn’t like me just because my work fixes theirs.”

Aisling leaned closer to say emphatically, “Well, I like you.”

Anna smiled again, this time more naturally. “Thanks. I like you too. I like having real friends. It’s nice.”

Aisling spotted a moment of worry in Anna's expression so she quickly said, "It's okay if that's still new and weird for you. It is for more folks than you'd imagine. Real friends are patient about it."

Anna's smile widened. "Thanks."

Carefully — yet determined to fish a little — Aisling said, "I can tell Data's a good friend for you too."

Anna's smile erupted into the same huge, beaming one she'd given him across the deck earlier. Aisling watched for any blushing or other signs of infatuation, but there weren't any. Just pure and obvious delight at the mere mention of his name. *That is one of the most wholesome things I've ever seen*, she thought. "He's pretty special to you, isn't he?"

Anna nodded, her eyes sparkling with joy the way Aoife's did when she saw any of the fluffy pets on board. "Data makes me feel safe even when I'm scared. I feel like even if there's dangerous stuff going on, he'll make it better."

"That's why you sent him the SOS when the Tarkanians attacked in engineering."

Anna appeared confused for a moment, but then said, "Oh, well, sort of. I knew he was on the bridge and that if I messed with that clamp with an SOS directed at him, he'd know I was up there and it meant something important. But also, yes, I knew he'd come." The lost-little-kid look Aisling had often seen on Anna's face returned. "He's the first person in my whole life that I am certain will come find me if I need help, no matter what."

"That's a really important thing to have, for anyone. You should have had that all along, and I'm glad you found it now."

The beaming smile came back. "Yeah. It's nice. He's nice. So are you. I like being around nice people." She leaned a little closer and said softly, "That's why I told Geordi I want to stay after the drive's done."

Aisling gasped and exclaimed, "That's fantastic!" Under other circumstances she'd have offered a hug, but remembering that

Anna didn't like to be touched — especially after Kiyohira's mocking of the fact earlier — she kept her distance.

“Is it?” Anna asked with the nervous but giddy grin of a child who is daring to hope that something magical is about to happen.

“Of course it is! The whole of engineering is going to be happy.”

“I hope so, this time.”

“Anna, these snooty people people who've used you and made you feel like shit for all the good things you contribute? Forget about them. You're ours now, and we're keeping you,” Aisling said definitively.

There was an unmistakable giddy bounce to Anna's gait as they continued along, enjoying the splendour of the base.



Stardate 47223.3 (Monday 23/03/2370, 11:45) — Starbase 84

“I'm due to start security protocol checks on the installation at noon,” Aisling said as she and Anna began walking back to a station transport pad. “What's your schedule? You going to stay for lunch on the station?”

Anna shrugged. “I'm doing various tech checks this afternoon too. I'd rather go back with you now, though, especially if you have another creative way to avoid people I don't want to see.”

Aisling replied, “Well, let's check that for you.” She approached a station wall panel and quickly flicked through a series of screens, entering her security code as necessary. “I can tell you Commander Riker is still on the bridge, Captain Picard is in a meeting room with Counselor Troi on board the station, and...looks like almost everyone at the docking frame is either our engineering crew or station crew. Oh wait, Ensign Aziz is there too. He's in red, but I'm guessing not someone you're worried about.”

Anna shook her head. “I’ve never heard of him.”

“Nice kid. Probably destined for higher command, if he can stop volunteering for every dangerous mission. Anyway, coast is clear if you want to transport over to the frame with me now. And if I’m wrong and someone comes at you, remember —”

“You’ve got my back.”

Aisling smiled broadly. “Exactly.”

The two stepped off the transport pad into the frame, a highly utilitarian construct filled with people busily moving items and equipment around. Safety lights blinked and twirled at various points along the walls and struts, as well as on the floating cargo pallets. It was easy at a glance to tell the Enterprise’s engineers from the station crew by their significantly different uniforms; station crew all wore blue-grey jumpsuits similar to Anna’s engineering-tan one, and all had identifying patches linking them to their teams and security access.

“Docking port’s over here,” Aisling said, pointing across the width of the frame and slightly to the fore, ship-wise. Anna briefly cringed, prompting Aisling to ask, “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Anna replied quickly. “It’s all hooked up with the walkway securely. It’s not open to space.”

Aisling raised a curious eyebrow. “No, of course not. Why would it be? We’re not spacewalking over. You sure you’re okay?”

“Mmhm, sorry, I’m fine,” Anna said as much to convince herself that a joined walkway didn’t count as an airlock as to keep Aisling from asking further questions. She put on a little smile and said, “Everything’s just a bit...you know...jumpy today. In my head, I mean.”

“Then turn around and look who’s over there. That’ll help you,” Aisling said, her supportive smile back in place.

Anna turned and saw Data standing beside a cargo pallet laden with sealed crates, talking with one of the station workers. Her mood indeed improved instantly, although as she and Aisling looked on it quickly became apparent that the conversation Data

was having wasn't a pleasant one. Data appeared to be confused as the other man kept moving around him, inspecting him.

The two women approached and soon could hear Data patiently and politely attempting to enquire about something to do with the items on the pallet.

"If you could please focus on the matter at hand," Data said. "This is only half of the new ODN joint compound materials. I require your assistance in locating the other pallet."

"Wait a minute, I just figured it out!" the other man said.

"Excellent," Data replied. "May I please have the location of the other pallet?"

But the other man wasn't talking about power assembly parts at all. "You're that android I've heard about, aren't you?"

"That is quite likely. I am the only operational android in Starfleet."

The man called out over his shoulder to another nearby worker, "Hey Alex! Come here! Check it out, this is that android thing I was telling you about!"

Anna and Aisling exchanged a look of concern, having arrived at Data's side. But Data did not appear concerned at all; he greeted them with a polite nod and smile, and then turned his attention back to the station staff.

The one named Alex approached, wide-eyed at Data. "Whoa, is it real?"

"I am indeed real. I need to address an issue with the crate count for the —"

The first one was suddenly up in Data's face, making Data lean back out of his way. "You're so life-like."

Data took a step back. "Thank you. Now if we could please discuss the matter of —"

Alex said, "It's so polite. I guess that's programming, right?"

The first one said, "Must be."

Data helpfully informed them, "I am indeed programmed for politeness. I also have a personal preference for polite interactions. To that extent, I must once again ask —"

“It blinks and everything!” Alex exclaimed.

That was more than Anna could withstand. She stepped forward and said in an irate tone, “I beg your pardon but he is a person, not an object, and he is standing right in front of you trying to talk to you!” She made particular effort to highlight his correct pronouns, offended at Data being described as “it”.

The one named Alex reacted with immediate shame, stepping back deferentially, but the first one snorted at her. “Lady, do you even have the first clue about what a technical achievement this is?”

Anna’s eyes narrowed as she icily said, “More than you do.”

Aisling stepped up beside Anna and muttered, “Damned right you do.”

But the worker rolled his eyes derisively. “I doubt that. I’ve read piles of articles in the cybernetics journals.”

Alex assessed the expressions of the women and said to his friend, “Doug, maybe let’s just leave them be.”

Doug scoffed, “Whatever. This is what comes from letting civilians into technical spaces.”

Suddenly from down the corridor a voice rang out, “Commander Data! I found the other pallet!”

They all turned to see a beaming Ensign Wong accompanying two more station workers pushing the other half of the ODN joint compound crates.

Data nodded appreciatively in his direction. “Excellent. Thank you, Ensign.”

As Wong and the workers passed them, Anna grinned viciously at Doug. “That’s also what comes from letting civilians into technical spaces.”

Aisling laughed and clapped her hands as Alex and Doug appeared baffled.

Data helpfully informed them, “Specialist White was on the team that designed those.” He smiled kindly at Anna and she beamed back at him, then turned with a more spiteful smile back at the other two men and curtsied.

Aisling snorted.

Alex tugged on Doug's sleeve and pulled him away to another part of the corridor.

Aisling clapped her hands again and exclaimed, "Anna, you are on fire today!"

Anna maintained her glare at the men for a moment, but then turned to Aisling and Data. "That's a good thing, right?"

"Yeah. You're torching the baddies," Aisling replied.

Data explained, "It is a metaphor. She does not mean that you are literally on fire."

Anna smiled at Data again with a little laugh, but it faded as she sighed and said, "I'm getting really tired of nasty people. Why is everyone so mean?"

Aisling gently said, "Most people aren't mean, but there are a lot of mean ones out there and unfortunately those of you who stand out as different attract their cruelty."

Anna and Data asked in unison, "Why?" Both appeared genuinely baffled, but Anna's expression was tinged with sadness as well.

Aisling put her hand over her heart. "Oh you two. You're so alike; both of you so kind-hearted that it doesn't even occur to you to have a malicious thought, does it?"

"I have no desire to be malicious," Data said.

Anna looked away guiltily.

Aisling clarified, "I mean neither of you would think to be mean to someone just for existing, the way people are mean to both of you."

"Of course not," Data said.

Anna's lingering guilt at her earlier unkind thoughts about Picard subsided a little. *I wouldn't be mean to him as long as he left me alone*, she thought as she shrugged.

Aisling continued, "That makes you both even more different, more special, and unfortunately even a bigger target."

Anna and Data exchanged a look of confusion.

Aisling said, “And I can see by your expressions that you don’t even get why being different attracts that crap, because you’d each protect someone for it, like you keep protecting each other. Which is endlessly sweet and beautiful. Honestly, I hope you both stay like this. We all need more people like you two in this world.”

CHAPTER NINE

Stardate 47223.4 (Monday 23/03/2370, 12:40) — Main Engineering

Data entered main engineering a short time after Anna and Lieutenant Navarro, having ensured the installation team he'd been assisting finally had everything in place. He found Anna at the central console, comparing information on a PADD to the master systems display.

As he approached, she noticed him and smiled up at him warmly. He noted her PADD contained her inspections checklist for the afternoon.

“Good,” he said.

“Good?” she asked.

“You appear to be reasonably content. I was concerned when I saw you enter the walkway to the ship.”

“Why?”

“There are two primary reasons: the first being I knew you would have to pass through the docking ports on Deck Twenty-Five.”

Anna's smile faded. “Oh, that. I didn't like it but with the walkway in place it doesn't look like an airlock anymore so I coped with it okay.”

Data's brow furrowed as he once again attempted to comprehend her fear. “So it is the appearance of the airlocks that disturbs you?”

“Um...in part. It's complicated. Probably seems inconsistent to you, sorry,” she said, cringing a little.

Data did not like making her uncomfortable when his intent was to maintain her happiness. “There is no need for apology, nor explanation if you are not comfortable discussing it. I simply wish

to understand sufficiently so that I can optimise your future experiences.”

She smiled a little once more. “Thank you. Let’s leave it at this: I don’t like seeing airlocks at all when they look like airlocks, even if I know they’re secure. It brings up...horrible memories.” The smile became strained; Data did not like that at all.

Eager to move on, he said, “Understood. I will endeavour to reduce your exposure to them in the future.”

“Thanks,” she said with clear relief.

“The second item of concern pertains to how the facility workers spoke to me today. It was very kind of you to intercede, but I do not wish for you to be upset by people speaking to me in that manner. It is quite normal.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Anna said firmly.

“Nonetheless, it is.”

“Well I’m learning that it’s better if I stand up for myself and stop letting people say awful things. You can too.”

“I find it is generally easier to let people ask their questions, say what they will, and then proceed as necessary when my novelty is no longer entertaining.”

Anna nodded. “I used to do that a lot, but you helped me put a bully in their place earlier today, so now I’m keen to do the same for you.”

“I did?” he asked, wondering when. He quickly reviewed every interaction of the day and concluded that she most likely meant when he had waved to her when she appeared unhappy in a conversation with Dr. Kiyohira, though he remained perplexed as to the nature of the interaction or why Kiyohira would bully Anna.

Anna replied, “Yeah. Just by being there. And I’m here for you. For all my friends. Like I was singing to Aisling the other day, *‘Nobody’s gonna harm you, no sir, not while I’m around.’*”

“I cannot be harmed by words.”

“That’s not true. Words that define us as lesser beings have a way of piling up until all of a sudden people can get away with doing terrible things to us.” She nodded subtly in the direction of

the drive bay area; Data noted that Dean Covett was in there, though he wasn't acknowledging either of them at all.

Anna then softly sang, barely above a whisper, "*Demons are prowling everywhere, nowadays. I'll send them howling. I don't care. I got ways.*" Returning to regular speech but still hushed, she added, "And if you can't feel outrage for people treating you like that, I'll feel enough of it for both of us. Nobody's ever going to get away with stripping you of your personhood, *not while I'm around.*"

"Thank you. You are a good friend."

That prompted her beaming smile to return, which he decided was a very pleasing result that could carry them both through the rest of their busy day.



Stardate 47224.9 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 02:00) — Anna's Quarters

Anna reached for her blankets to pull them tighter around herself, but her hand couldn't find them. She grumbled and noticed her voice sounded different. Upon opening an eye to look around, she realised her entire body felt different and the walls were no longer her quarters on the Enterprise.

She sat up and blinked around. *I'm on the Baltimore*, she noted dispassionately at first. It took a moment for her to understand that that wasn't right, but she couldn't suss out where she was supposed to be. All she was certain of was that she was out of place, in the wrong age and body, and increasingly frightened by the whole thing.

How old am I? I feel like...six? Maybe? That's not right. I'm much older than that now. I'm...why can't I remember how old I am? Where is everyone?

Anna knew she wanted to call out for someone in particular, but couldn't remember who it was. Her childhood memory took over

and she found herself trying to shout, “Daddy? Why aren’t you here yet?” but her throat was dry and she couldn’t make the words work. Instead, she began to cry.

A figure appeared and gently said, “Hush now, you’re going to be all right. I promise.”

Anna looked up through her tears. “Music Man?”

“That’s right. Here, I know what you need,” he said as he took her by the hand. They floated down through the doors of the Baltimore’s corridors to the briefing room. Music Man set little Anna on the overturned couch there, then activated the console on the wall. The opening title sequence of *The Wizard of Oz* came on, and Anna was instantly relaxed, just as she always was when Music Man put on her favourite movie.

But since she knew something about this wasn’t right, she tried asking, “Can’t you call him for me and tell him to come get me soon?”

Music Man sat beside her. “Who, your father? No, I’m afraid not, my little cherub. It’s against the rules. Plus I’m only imaginary, don’t forget!”

She rested her head on his arm. “I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

“Well then aren’t you a lucky little creature, because you’re not alone. You’re not even here. You’re dreaming all of this.”

“I am?”

“Oh yes indeed. You’re a grown-up now. You’re on the Enterprise, safely tucked in your bed, and your Daddy is just a few decks above you.”

“He is?”

“Yes, my cherub.” Music Man leaned in close with a cheeky grin. “Want to know a secret about him?”

Anna nodded, wide-eyed and expectant.

Music Man whispered, “He’s dreaming about you right now too.”

Little Anna gasped. “Really?”

Music Man nodded, still grinning ear to ear.

But Anna was suddenly doubtful. She frowned suspiciously and asked, “How do you know? And how are you in my dream if I’m a grownup now?”

Music Man laughed. “Don’t you worry your little human head about that. I’m simply keeping an eye on you, like I always have. Now then, let’s get you nicely distracted from all of this again...”

The dream shifted, melting away the wreckage of the Baltimore to open up into a bright, sunny day in Munchkinland. Little Anna stood up on her one leg, and then was immediately surrounded by magical, dancing flowers all eager to carry her along so she didn’t even need to hop.

Off to the side of the red brick road, Music Man smiled in satisfaction at the pleasant dream he’d made for her, and then disappeared.



Stardate 47224.9 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 02:00) — Picard’s Quarters

Picard opened his eyes to discover his bed was gone and he was lying on the hard, rough, metal grate floor of the Borg cube. He quickly checked himself all over for implants, sighing with relief when he found none. But his relief was short-lived, for he had no idea how he’d ended up on a Borg ship, nor how to escape.

He took a deep breath and told himself, *I’m dreaming. I have neither the time nor the energy for this nonsense tonight. I must take control of this or else wake up and do something else.*

He stood and listened carefully in either direction down the corridor. To his right he could hear the derisive laughter of the Borg Queen. But to his left, he heard a gentler sound, something much more enticing deep into his heart.

Picard cautiously made his way to the left and peeked around the corner, but what he saw shocked him so much that he forgot to

remain hidden. He could not help but round the corner fully and stand there, mouth agape, as he discovered Maman in a rocking chair humming a familiar tune over a well-wrapped, peacefully sleeping infant in her arms.

He wanted to run to her, grab her, and flee this terrible place before the Queen could come and harm her. He wanted to shout out a warning, to call to the Enterprise to beam them out, to take up arms, to do anything but stand there motionless as he continued to do.

Maman looked up at him and smiled in that way she had of making everything all right. Though she continued humming, she made a hushing motion to him and beckoned him closer.

With leaden feet, he crept up alongside and managed to whisper, “Maman! We can’t stay here. It’s not safe!”

She reached out and caressed his cheek. “Hush now, Jean-Luc, we’re all going to be all right. I promise.”

“But Maman —” he began to protest, intending to point all around to the terrible Borg walls full of conduits, cables, and sickeningly green lights. But as he moved, it all began to blur.

“Jean-Luc, it’s just a dream. We’re all quite safe now. See? Look around again,” she said in a voice so gentle that the mere sound of it made him feel as if he was floating on air.

As he did as she asked, he discovered they were in the library at the chateau, surrounded by thousands of small objects of familiarity and comfort. Better still, his father and Robert were nowhere to be seen.

He pointed to the baby in her arms and asked, “Who is that?”

Maman smiled proudly at him. “I think you know who it is.”

Instinctively, he found his arms reaching out towards the sleeping infant. “Can I hold her?”

But Maman shook her head and kept rocking the child. “Not yet. She’s still too fragile. One day you’ll get to.”

“She’s not crying anymore.”

“That’s right. She’s safe now. She’s learning what it means to be cared for. She’ll be all right.”

Picard found himself standing awkwardly and watching, not even sure if he was a boy or a man, if this was indeed a dream or some kind of memory.

Maman smiled warmly again. “Jean-Luc, you can go play. It’s all right. I’m going to take care of my granddaughter for awhile. I have some things to teach her.”

When he looked down at himself again, he realised he was indeed a boy and the urge to play was surprisingly intense. Then again, so was the urge to stay close to his mother’s side.

As if she could read his mind, Maman said, “My sweet boy, mon petit capitaine, go play at your starship games. Everything is all right now. I’m watching over you both, I promise. I always will.”

“All right,” he conceded, turning and heading towards the door.

As he walked away feeling entirely at peace, he heard Maman softly sing, “*Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high, there’s a land that I heard of once in a lullaby. Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue, and the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.*”



Stardate 47225.4 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 06:00) — Data’s Quarters

Data found himself standing in a visually distorted corridor of the ship. He began to walk along it to determine if the distortion was indeed merely visual or if space itself was being contorted in this area, and to attempt to discern which corridor it was as the door numbers were too muddled to read.

As he proceeded along the curve, he came upon Geordi standing against a bulkhead.

“Data, there you are,” Geordi said. “We need to install that plasma conduit right away. We’re bringing the new warp core online in about three hours.”

“I will go to Deck Twenty and begin modifications,” Data replied, though he was uncertain why that deck would be useful as it was mostly comprised of engineering crew quarters and emergency command crew quarters. There were indeed plasma conduits on Deck Twenty as was the case with all decks, but Data was unaware of why any of them on that deck in particular should be of interest.

But Geordi seemed to think it was a good place to start, “Great. I’ll meet you in engineering as soon as you’re finished there.”

Data nodded and began to walk away. As he progressed down the still-distorted corridor, Geordi called out from behind him, “This ought to be a lot of fun!”

He came to a junction that matched no part of the ship in terms of specific corridor curvature and bulkhead placement, but as he tried to once again calculate his current location, he heard a ringing sound from down the adjoining corridor. Data ran a comparison of the sound to his audio files and determined it was an ancient telephone’s ring.

Looking towards the sound, he saw a junction mostly mirroring the one he was in — again, in a manner that did not fit any of the Enterprise’s deck layouts — but instead of a turbolift in the long wall there was a great, glowing, red hole. Oddly dressed workmen appeared to be using mining picks to widen the gap in the bulkhead and to strike the power conduit behind.

Data walked towards them and asked, “Excuse me, do you have authorisation to work in this area?” When they did not acknowledge him, he added, “You are dismantling a warp plasma conduit. I must ask you to stop.”

They continued to ignore him, so he tried to repeat his words more loudly in case they could not hear him over their hammering noises. But instead of words, all that came out of his mouth was a high-pitched tone that he could not control.

That did, however, get the attention of the workmen. They dropped their tools and came towards Data, at which point he

noted their outfits were not merely unusual but appeared to be replicas of nineteenth-century miner clothing.

“Be quiet!” one of them shouted.

Data attempted once more to speak, but was unable to do so. The sound did stop, however.

The workers grabbed him nonetheless. One of them twisted his left arm until it broke off, which Data found quite surprising since his removable joints should not incur such damage, and certainly not from weak human hands. The men then tackled him to the ground and twisted and pulled at his limbs, tearing him apart, and he found he could speak no word of protest.

At the moment where they ripped off his head, he woke to find himself in his bed.

Data ran an instant emergency diagnostic and found that he was whole and undamaged. He sat up and ran another diagnostic — still a brief one, but enough to determine that he was in working order and to confirm that the entire experience stemmed from his dream program.

“Hm,” he said, somewhat astonished by the violence.

Data stood, noted the time via his internal chronometer, and decided that since they were due to leave Starbase 84 at 0800 and proceed at impulse for an hour to be clear of the station before starting the new drive, it would be prudent to begin his day early.

He put out fresh food and water for Spot, picked her up from the foot of the bed despite her grumble of protest, gave her the usual count of pettings, set her back on the bed, and left his quarters to head to main engineering.

However, upon leaving his quarters he found the memory of the distorted corridor clashed with reality most unpleasantly. He was certain of which visuals were real and which were from the dream, but the dream appeared to still have a hold over his perceptions. Data did not like the sensation and decided it warranted discussion with Geordi when there was time around the day’s events.



Picard sat at his desk, grumbling to himself. He turned off his terminal, rose, and walked out to the bridge, hands clasped behind his back, sighing as he went.

Riker was standing behind the ops station and noticed the Captain's foul mood immediately. "Something wrong, sir?" he asked.

"I just got a message from Starfleet Command," Picard muttered.

"Bad news?"

"You could say that. I've been invited to the annual Starfleet Admiral's banquet," Picard complained.

"My condolences," Riker said with a cheeky little grin as the two went to their seats.

"I've managed to avoid it for the past six years by being too far away and I thought I'd avoided invitations by strategically avoiding certain people when we were at Starbase 84, but now it would seem my luck has run out," Picard explained. "The Venture lies halfway between here and Starbase 219, ready to host the banquet in twenty six hours which is more than enough time for us to get there.

Riker nodded.

Picard sighed. "I can't think of anything more tedious. Fifty admirals shaking hands, making dull conversation, uninteresting food, boring speeches."

"Can't you think of some excuse to get out of it?"

"After six years, Number One, I don't think I have any excuses left."

Riker could no longer suppress his amusement.

Picard leaned back in his seat and adjusted his uniform. "Grin all you like, Number One. One day you shall suffer this same fate."

“That’s why it’s in my interest to keep you alive at all costs, sir,” Riker said, his grin widening.

Picard grumbled again in reply.



Stardate 47225.7 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 09:07) — Main Engineering

As teams reported their final operational checks for the new drive, Data and Geordi set the remaining parameters on the dilithium housing and reaction chamber on the drive itself.

Data’s brow furrowed as he asked, “Geordi, have you ever had a nightmare?”

“Yeah, sure, Data. Everybody does from time to time,” Geordi replied as he took measurements with his tricorder to ensure everything was in place.

“I have had one hundred eleven dreams since I first discovered this program nine months ago. In all of that time, I have never experienced such strange and disturbing imagery. I believe it was a nightmare.”

“Nightmares are part of dreaming, Data. Maybe you’ve just discovered another new level to your program,” Geordi said as he moved to a drive control panel inside the bay.

“Perhaps,” Data said. He passed behind Anna — who was seated at her usual console overlooking the drive bay and busily confirming the incoming reports — and entered his readings into the chief engineer’s console opposite. He then walked back into the bay to stand beside Geordi once more. “I have also noted that I am spending an inordinate amount of time thinking about nightmare imagery. One could almost say I am preoccupied.”

Anna stood and came up behind them both with a PADD.

“Well, it’s perfectly normal, Data. Sometimes when I have a nightmare, I can’t shake that weird feeling for a couple of days,” Geordi said.

Anna handed the PADD to Geordi. “I hate when that happens. I have nightmares all the time, but yeah, the one that linger...” She shuddered.

Aisling — who was at the next panel over in the bay, performing final security checks on the drive and all programming for it — said, “Yep, it’s pretty normal. Awful, but normal.”

Anna smiled encouragingly at Data. “I had a really unsettling one the other night that I’m only starting to recover from. You were in it.”

“I was in your nightmare?” Data asked with concern.

Anna quickly clarified, “As a good guy, don’t worry! There was...a bunch of bad stuff I don’t really want to talk about but then you were there at the end and made it better because I knew I was safe with you.”

“I would always endeavour to keep you safe,” Data declared.

Anna beamed at him. “I know.”

Geordi noted the two looking at each other meaningfully and turned to Aisling, who gave him a shrug and nod back in wordless agreement.

“Anyway,” Anna said cheerily, “you were also the hero of it because you showed me the solution to solve the discrepancy between the starboard PTC joint readout at junction fifty-six, so thank you for that.”

“You should not thank me. It was your own mind that came up with that solution,” Data pointed out.

“Yeah, but you being safe in real life gave me what I needed in my head to sort it out.”

“Hm. Intriguing. In that case, I am honoured to inspire pleasant thoughts.”

“You do. You really really do,” she said with another beaming smile. Then she shrugged with a little laugh. “Now I’m going to see if the power readouts are nearly as pleasing,” she said as she

went back to the fore of engineering to consult the master systems display.

Aisling and Geordi nodded at each other again. Aisling also headed out of the drive bay, murmuring to Geordi as she passed, “Mmhm, we’ll talk later.” As she went out, Andrea passed her, heading for Geordi with a dreamy expression. Aisling sighed and rolled her eyes.

Geordi turned when he heard Aisling’s sigh and saw Tyler coming for him. Aisling shrugged at him and continued on her way into the front area.

Geordi sighed himself and muttered to Data, “Speaking of nightmares...” just as Andrea came up behind them.

“Commander La Forge? I just finished recalibrating the starboard EPS module,” she said.

“That’s great, Ensign. Thank you,” Geordi replied tensely.

With a beaming smile of her own, Andrea said, “It’s just like you said: reset the power tap and the module came right online. You have such a wonderful grasp of engineering principles. I’m learning so much just by being around you.”

Data turned to Geordi with a bemused expression.

Geordi cleared his throat and diplomatically replied, “I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you help Farrell check the deuterium cartridges? I’m just about to bring the warp core online. All right?”

“Anything you say!” Andrea said, bouncing off with an enormous grin.

Data quietly said, “Geordi, you do not seem to appreciate Ensign Tyler’s enthusiasm.”

“She’s enthusiastic all right,” Geordi grumbled. “About me.” He crossed to another console.

Data’s brow furrowed as he followed Geordi. “I do not understand.”

“She’s got a crush on me, Data,” Geordi whispered.

“You do not share her affection?”

“Exactly. And quite frankly, it’s beginning to get a little bit...uncomfortable.”

Data nodded. “I believe I understand. You are concerned about unintentionally hurting Ensign Tyler’s feelings.”

“Yeah, something like that,” Geordi said as he returned to the dilithium housing on the drive.

Once again, Data followed him. “It would appear that you require a third party to intervene on your behalf. I will be happy to speak to her,” he offered, already beginning to head in Andrea’s direction.

Geordi quickly put up a hand to stop Data in his tracks. “No, Data! I’ll take care of it myself. Thanks.”

“Geordi, when I first awoke from my nightmare, there was a brief moment when I —”

The main engineering comms suddenly erupted with Picard’s voice. “*Bridge to Commander La Forge. What’s our status?*”

Across the room, Anna cringed, but only Aisling noticed.

“We’re ready to bring the new core online, Captain,” Geordi replied loudly as an announcement to all. “Stand by.”

Geordi and Data went back to the chief engineer’s corner, with Data sitting in Anna’s usual chair. Anna moved to stand just outside the drive bay door, watching the drive with her hands twisting together nervously and whisper-singing, “*Curtain up! Light the lights! You’ve got nothing to hit but the heights!*”

Aisling came up behind her and said, “It’s going to be fine, don’t worry.”

Anna grimaced and brought her hands up to her face to peek through her fingers.

Geordi announced, “All right, let’s do it.” Several engineers around him took positions as he tapped the activation sequence into another console overlooking the drive bay. “Initialising deuterium infusion sequence.”

The drive began to hum and the familiar blue cascading lights filled the room, albeit over a new green glow from the central reaction chamber component.

Geordi took in a very pleased deep breath. “It’s a thing of beauty, isn’t it?”

Data nodded to him and then turned to smile at Anna, but she was transfixed on the drive and muttering, “Please work, please work,” repeatedly.

“Now let’s see how fast she can run,” Geordi said, tapping his combadge. “La Forge to Bridge. Warp power at your discretion, Captain.”



On the bridge, Picard enthusiastically replied, “Acknowledged.” He stood, adjusting his uniform again, with Riker rising behind him. “Ensign Gates, set a rendezvous course with the Venture along the route to Starbase 219, warp six. Engage.” He pointed his finger forward in his usual signature gesture.

However — unlike usual — the ship remained in place with no sign of going to warp whatsoever.

“Engage,” Picard repeated more firmly.

Still, nothing happened.

Picard and Riker exchanged a look of concern. Picard tapped his badge again and said, “Bridge to engineering. Mr. La Forge, why isn’t my ship moving?”



Down in engineering, all signs of joy and mirth disappeared from the engineers’ faces. Anna appeared horror-struck as Geordi and Data scrambled to alter several settings on tricorders and consoles.

“I’m on it, sir,” Geordi replied. “There’s a warp plasma conduit out of alignment, but I think I’ve got it fixed now,” he said as he entered the new parameters. “Ready, sir.”



On the bridge, Picard nodded. “Very well. Ensign Gates?”

Gates once again attempted to engage the warp drive, but this time primary power went out all over the ship, turning off lights and other non-essential functions.

Riker and Picard exchanged another irate look.

“Mr. La Forge?” Picard queried in a dire tone.



Down in engineering, Geordi replied, “Stand by, Captain.”

Data interjected, “Captain, I am taking the warp-coil engines offline.” As soon as he did so, primary power was reinstated and the lights came back on across the ship.

Anna cringed helplessly.

Aisling whispered to her, “It’s fine. We’ll figure it out. Don’t panic.” But Aisling also noted Dean Covett standing to the side, grinning maliciously at Anna. Aisling tried to give him a look of warning but he was studiously ignoring her. She briefly wondered if he’d done something to sabotage the drive, but quickly concluded that as asinine as he was, he surely wouldn’t throw away his entire career just to needle Anna.

Geordi said, “La Forge to Bridge. I’m sorry, sir, but we’re going to have to reconfigure this plasma conduit. It’s going to take at least a couple of hours, sir.”

“*Understood,*” came Picard’s voice over the engineering comm, but it was clear to all that he was not in an understanding mood.

Data stood, picked up his tricorder, and hurried into the drive bay area to take readings from the PTC assembly at its connection point to the drive.

“Come on, let’s figure it out together,” Aisling said, guiding Anna to take Data’s place at the console.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Anna said in a quavering voice. “I’ll recheck everything but it was all fine.” She turned to Geordi and plaintively added, “I swear it was!”

Geordi turned to Anna, his frustration and stress apparent in his expression, but Aisling gestured at him over the back of Anna’s head to put on a brave face. Geordi nodded, took a deep breath, and calmly said to Anna, “I know. Everything checked out. These things happen with upgrades.” Then more loudly to everyone around he said, “That’s why we’re going to recheck the whole PTC line and find any fault that we can and address it. Back into your installation and inspection teams from earlier and get it done, people!” He focused on Anna once more to add, “The plans and formulae are all still sound. Something’s just gone wrong and we’ll get to the bottom of it.”

Anna nodded sadly and turned to the console.

Aisling quietly said to her, “I’ll be at the security station over there, watching your back. You’re okay. You’ve got this. We’ve all got it, together.”

Anna shrugged, so Aisling left her to it.

Geordi passed behind Anna and entered the drive bay to consult with Data, but found him standing staring into space with a tricorder pointed listlessly at the PTC junction.

“Uh Data?” Geordi asked, concerned. “Find something?”

Data blinked rapidly and then furrowed his brow. He turned to Geordi and said, “I apologise. I appear to have...lost focus.”

“You? Losing focus? Data, is this more of what you were telling me yesterday, that the dreams and now the nightmares are lingering and distracting?”

“I am not certain other than I am experiencing something...unusual.”

Geordi sighed and patted Data's shoulder. "Okay, you know what? You need to sort that out. I've got enough folks working on this. You need to work on you right now. Go back to your quarters and think some calming thoughts and try to have a nicer dream. My Grandma always said you can beat the bad dreams by thinking of warm fuzzies just before you sleep."

Data's brow went up. "Hm. An interesting hypothesis."

"So go try it and then come back. We've got this."

Data nodded. "Thank you. It is 0914. I will return in ninety minutes."

Geordi put on a strained smile. "Good. Sweet dreams." As Data left, he sighed again, grabbed a PADD, sent a private message to Troi to let her know that Data was having intrusive nightmares and may need some assistance, put the PADD away, and began checking in with his engineering teams up and down the entire PTC lines throughout the ship.

CHAPTER TEN

Stardate 47225.7 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 09:32) — Data's Quarters

Data was peering closely at a sleepy Spot on the end of the bed when his door chimed. He sat up and said, "Enter."

Troi came in with a warm yet concerned smile. "Hello Data."

"Counselor," Data replied.

"What are you doing?" she asked as she approached the other side of the bed.

"I have been watching Spot sleep because she is both warm and fuzzy. In the past fifteen minutes she has had twelve muscle spasms, which indicates she was dreaming. I have often wondered what Spot dreams about. Her twitching and her rapid breathing would seem to suggest anxiety, but Spot has never seen a mouse or any other form of rodentia. She has never encountered an insect, nor been chased by a canine."

Spot partially sat up and stretched a little.

Troi sat beside Spot and petted her gently, which Spot appeared to both allow and possibly even enjoy. "I understand you've had some interesting dreams recently," Troi said. "Geordi was worried about you and he wanted me to check in on you before you were back asleep again."

"That was very thoughtful of him. I have been debating whether or not to initiate another dream sequence."

"Because of the nightmares?"

"I have found them to be quite unsettling."

"Data, you shouldn't be afraid of dark imagery in your dreams. It's a natural expression of your unconscious, if you have an unconscious," she conceded. "I'm not really sure how your positronic brain works but if it's anything like ours, then there's part of you that's trying to express itself through your dream state and I think you should allow yourself to experience it. As Sigmund

Freud said, ‘Dreams are the royal road to the knowledge of the mind.’”

“Hm,” Data said appreciatively. “Thank you, Counselor. I believe I will initiate a dream program now.”

Troi stood. “Let me know how it goes. Goodnight, Data.”

“Goodnight, Counselor,” he replied. When she left, he said, “Goodnight, Spot,” and rose to prepare his bed. He plumped up his pillow and slipped under the covers — once again still in his uniform and shoes — which jostled the blanket sufficiently that Spot abandoned the bed in protest. Data held his arms out, performed an approximation of a tired yawn, told the computer to dim the lights, and laid back stiffly in what he imagined was an appropriate sleeping position.

Moments later, he found himself in an eerily empty Ten Forward, except for Worf sitting at a table with a triangular slice of cake with blue frosting. There was also a combadge on the cake, which Worf gently took off and laid to the side.

Worf picked up a fork and used it to eat the pointed tip of the cake, clearly enjoying it a great deal. “Mmm,” he said. “Delicious.”

“What kind of cake are you eating?” Data asked.

“It is cellular peptide cake with mint frosting,” Worf replied, speaking the last words with abundant enjoyment. “Would you like a bite?”

“No, thank you,” Data replied as the same ancient telephone sound from his earlier dream played once more. “Excuse me, Mister Worf,” he said, and then turned to locate the source of the sound. Only then did he notice that Doctor Crusher and Commander Riker were sitting together at the bar, with the former using a long straw to drink a red and glowing fluid out of the latter’s head.

As Data approached them, Riker admonished, “Aren’t you going to answer that, Mr. Data?”

“Sir?”

“That damn ringing. Answer it, will you?” Riker implored.

Data once again turned to locate the source of the ringing. “Yes, sir,” he said, moving further to the port of Ten Forward and discovering the workmen from his previous dream there, even though he had not seen them when he had spoken to Worf moments before. They were all leaning over another table and muttering amongst themselves. “Please identify yourselves,” Data requested. “I must ask what you are trying to —”

As in the other dream, Data lost the ability to speak and all that came out of his mouth was a high-pitched sound that aggravated the workers. Once again, one of them shouted at him, “Be quiet!”

Data closed his mouth, and the noise stopped.

Instead of attacking him, the workman handed him an oddly serrated knife and moved aside so he could approach the table. There he saw Counselor Troi, or rather her head, but her body was the same cake that Worf had been eating. It had neither arms nor legs. A piece had been cut out, which Data noted matched the piece on Worf’s plate, including where her combadge would have been.

Troi saw Data and begged, “Please, don’t hurt me, Data.”

Data had no desire to use the knife, nor to eat cake. He very much wished to assist Counselor Troi and not harm her, yet something in the dream compelled him to continue forward with the knife nonetheless. Experiencing an overwhelming need to cut the cake in spite of all of his ethical programming, he said, “I am sorry, Counselor,” and began to push the knife into the icing.

“No! Don’t! No! No! Data!”

Troi screamed out in pain, and the sound set off multiple safety and moral alarms throughout his system. Data wanted to stop but could not. The nightmare was going to progress with or without his consent, and he did not like it at all.



Geordi held in another grumble, but barely. Teams all over the ship were reporting in the same thing: nothing measurably wrong with any of the power conduits — not by sight, tricorder, or any test they could run — yet multiple, cascading faults along the lines. Worse, the faults kept shifting and moving around in ways that shouldn't even be possible.

Realising his original two-hour estimate was likely to expand if they couldn't figure out what was going on, he looked at the time on his LCARS display and wondered aloud, "Why isn't Data back yet?"

"Sir?" asked Ensign Taurik behind him.

"Data said ninety minutes. Data's never late unless something is wrong." He tapped his combadge and said, "Geordi to Data, you coming back?"

There was no reply.

Taurik blinked at him, expressionless as ever.

Geordi let the grumble come out and added a loud sigh.

Anna came around the corner from the drive bay with a tricorder in hand and a desperate expression on her face. "Geordi, I can't figure this out. I'm so sorry."

"Neither can I, Anna. It's not your fault," he said as he stood.

"It feels like it must be."

"Well that feeling is wrong, not your calculations, like I said before," he replied, realising he wasn't doing a good job of hiding his frustration from her but hoping she wouldn't take it personally.

Anna slumped her shoulders. "I guess...maybe I could go check the upgrades along the lines in the Jefferies tubes if you want to give me clearance for that?"

Geordi nodded, leaned over to his primary console, tapped a few keys, and said in as much of a supportive tone as he could muster, "You've got it. Full access. Anything you can find will be gold, but if you don't find anything, I'm not blaming you."

Anna nodded sadly but resolutely and headed up the Jeffries tube.

Geordi rubbed his forehead as he walked over to the master systems console in the middle of the room.

“Deuterium supply is fully scanned and clean, sir,” Lieutenant McGrath reported.

“Yeah, good, thanks,” he replied. He glanced up at Navarro at her station.

She shrugged at him. “Still running live security scans system-wide and no flags.”

“Has anyone seen Data come back down?”

“Not since he left,” Aisling replied.

“That’s a red flag by itself,” Geordi said tersely. “I’m stuck in a nightmare of my own now!” He tapped his combadge and said, “Counselor Troi, Lieutenant Worf, please meet me on Deck Two,” as he hurried out of engineering.



Stardate 47225.9 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 11:03) — Data’s Quarters

“Data!” Troi’s voice rang out again in Data’s dream as he continued to cut the cake, but this time firmly and not as a scream. “Data!” she repeated, and he felt a hand bat at his foot.

Data opened his eyes and discovered he was in his bed. He sat up, utterly perplexed to find Geordi, Worf, and Counselor Troi standing before him, all regarding him with significant concern.

“What is wrong?” Data asked.

“We’ve been trying to wake you up for the last five minutes,” Troi replied.

“When you didn’t show up on time in engineering, I got worried” Geordi said. “And you didn’t answer when I called you on the comm.”

Data performed a quick systems check. “My internal chronometer was supposed to wake me twenty-five minutes ago.”

“You must have overslept,” Worf surmised.

Data's expression was grave as he said, "That is not possible. Something is wrong."



Stardate 47225.9 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 11:15) — Main Engineering

Geordi scanned Data as the latter sat on a chair beside the chief engineer's corner with engineering teams still busily working all around them. "I can't find anything wrong with your internal time base. As far as I can tell, your primary systems check out fine," Geordi said.

"I will compare my autonomic logs with the ship's chronometer. Perhaps we have overlooked something," Data said as he stood and went to the chief's console.

Geordi set down the tricorder and followed Data. He leaned on the corner of the wall and said, "You know, Data, there's an awful lot we don't know about your dream program. Maybe it was designed to cause side effects. I mean, for all we know, Doctor Soong might have intended for you to oversleep from time to time. It's part of the human experience."

"It is a possibility," Data conceded. "However, I would prefer to make certain there are no anomalies in my neural nets." He continued comparing parameters with the ship's systems.

Geordi crossed his arms. "You know, I'm curious. What were you dreaming about when we woke you up?"

Data hesitated, considering the ramifications of relaying the disturbingly violent actions he had taken in his dream. He carefully replied, "I have not fully assimilated its impact. I would prefer to study the images further before discussing them."

"Hm. Sounds like it must have been pretty strange."

“‘Strange’ is not a sufficient adjective to describe the experience,” Data replied.

Geordi dropped his voice very low so as not to be overheard. “You seem to be having a lot of unusual stuff going on lately. I know I got it wrong about thinking you had a crush on Anna, but I hope you feel like you can still talk to me if you need to. I’m sorry about that.”

“There is no need to apologise. In fact I wish very much I could experience a ‘crush’ and an ensuing romance, followed by a long term relationship,” Data said.

Geordi chuckled, “Yeah tell me about it.”

Data thus continued to explain, “It is something I have long considered, starting when I was still at the academy and observed that —” He abruptly stopped. “You did not mean that as a literal request.”

Geordi smiled indulgently, “No I didn’t, but that’s okay.”

“You meant you also wish to find someone to engage with in a long term relationship.”

“Yeah.”

“And Ensign Tyler is not of interest to you.”

“No, she isn’t.”

Data nodded. “The mismatch between who is interested in whom does appear to be a consistent problem in humanoid mating.”

Geordi chuckled again. “Oh yeah.”

Data tilted his head to one side. “And yet it yields some of your greatest works of literature and art.”

“Yeah, all that rich human experience is fertile ground in more ways than one.”

Data’s brow furrowed. “Do you mean as a metaphor for growing cultural works?”

Geordi leaned in closer. “I meant it like that but also that it’s a big field full of...you know...shit,” he whispered.

Data’s brow went up and he nodded. “Ah. I understand.”

“Yeah.”

“I am sorry your love life is shit,” Data said in an earnestly kind tone.

Geordi was startled temporarily, but then burst into loud laughter, drawing attention from everyone nearby while Data looked at him with mild concern.

Back to normal volume, Geordi said, “I think we’re all losing our damned minds over all of this!”

Murmurs and sighs of agreement percolated through engineering as people resumed their busy tasks of trying to get the drive going.

Lowering his voice once more, Geordi said to Data, “We’re going to be at least another hour in here. Maybe you should go check out your head some more. But maybe don’t go to sleep again without letting me know and setting some external alarms?”

Data nodded. “I have an idea of something that may help. I will be in Holodeck Two, but remaining conscious.”



Stardate 47226.0 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 11:20) — Holodeck Two

“Tell me more about this...uh...cake,” the holodeck version of Dr. Freud asked from a winged armchair in his extensively decorated office. He held a notebook and pencil in his hands.

Data — lying prone on a lavish couch next to the chair — replied, “It is difficult to explain. Counselor Troi’s body...was a cake.”

“Her upper body,” Freud emphasised. “Describe the knife you used to cut the Counselor.”

“It had a black handle and a serrated blade, and it was quite long.”

“How long?” Freud asked suspiciously.

“Twenty five centimetres in length.”

Freud chuckled and wrote in his notebook. “And what happened next?”

“One of the workmen pointed to her right shoulder. At that moment, I had an overwhelming urge to cut a piece out of the cake.”

“And did you?”

“Yes,” Data admitted. “As I began slicing the cake, she reacted as though I was causing her pain. Yet I could not stop cutting. That is when I woke up.”

“Hm,” Freud said with a nod.

“Doctor Freud, I am curious —” Data said as he began to sit up. But Freud chastised him to lay back down, so Data nodded and did so. He then continued, “I am curious. What do my nightmares mean?”

Freud snapped his notebook shut, stood, and crossed the room. “I believe you are experiencing a classic dismemberment dream.” He set his notebook down on the desk, opened a small chest there, and withdrew a cigar. “Or in your case, being a mechanical man, a dismantlement dream.”

“I do not understand,” Data replied dubiously.

“Your mechanistic qualities are trying to reassert themselves over your human tendencies; ego and id struggling for domination. The workmen symbolise the ever present id constantly working to destroy the ego,” Freud said, wagging his cigar in the air. “Now the image of Counselor Troi — a female — is devoured by you, clearly indicating an unconscious desire to possess your own mother.”

Data’s brow furrowed. “But I do not have a mother.”

“Do not interrupt! The knife in its violent connotation suggests a certain feeling of sexual inadequacy.”

“But I have no sexual desire,” Data said.

Freud excitedly exclaimed, “Ach! Impotence on top of everything! It is all becoming clear to me now.” With a gleam of anticipation he added, “There might be a paper in this.”

Data sat up and shook his head. “I do not believe I am being helped by this session.”

Freud pointed his cigar at Data. “Classic transference. Your anger toward me is — in fact, — the animosity you feel toward your father. You are a polymorphously perverse individual, Mr. Data, and I recommend full psychoanalysis. I believe I can fit you in next Tuesday.”

Data stood. “That will not be necessary. Computer, end program.”

Data frowned and headed back to engineering, his head even less “clear” than when he had left.



Stardate 47226.0 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 11:20) — Jefferies Tube
Between Decks Thirty-Three and Thirty-Four, Sector Three

Anna slid on her backside to another section of the Jefferies tube, using one of her whiteslides. She sighed loudly when she confirmed yet again that nothing was wrong anywhere along the power conduits she’d both worked on and inspected before. All readings matched what other inspection teams had also found.

The lack of explanation for the drive’s failure rankled. She knew nothing she’d done at any point along the project from development through installation was at fault because the readings clearly indicated that truth, but a nagging sense of failure still shadowed her, growing darker every minute that passed without a solution.

“There you are!” came a sudden voice from the junction behind her, making her jump.

She turned and saw Reg peering into the tube.

“Oh. Um, hi, Reg. Aren’t you working with Myers’ team?”

He entered the horizontal tube and crawled on his hands and knees over to her. “I was, but...well...they didn’t really need me around. So I thought I’d come find you.”

“Oh. Well, I’m just taking readings here. Don’t really need help.”

“I thought maybe I could...you know...keep you company. You said I could talk to you about the Braypolara books sometime.”

“I did say that. Yes,” Anna carefully confirmed.

“Now works for me,” he said with a hopeful smile.

“Now?” she asked incredulously. “While the whole drive project is failing?”

“Well neither of us is doing much to help fix it,” he said.

Anna’s eyes went wide. “Actually, I’m trying very hard to concentrate on fixing it. Very, very hard. It’s important that I focus and help.”

Reg looked like a dejected puppy. “Oh, okay, if you don’t want me around...”

Anna gritted her teeth for a moment, and then recalled her intention to try to maintain this friendship despite feeling as though he was manipulating her. “No, Reg, that’s not what I said. I just mean that if you could help more somewhere else, the primary goal right now is to get the drive going. Especially before someone blames me for it not working.”

“Why would anybody blame you?” Reg said earnestly. But before Anna could find comfort in his words, he added, “Your contributions are only part of the whole design and not enough for this level of malfunction.”

Anna blinked at him.

He continued, “That is...I mean to say...even if all of your calculations and designs were completely flawed — which probably they aren’t, I mean statistically speaking they aren’t likely to all be entirely wrong — then you’d still be wrong along with other people because whatever’s going wrong is at a total, complete, systemic level across the whole thing.”

Anna had absolutely no idea how to respond.

Reg grinned nervously.

Anna turned away and took another reading.

“Anyway,” Reg said cautiously. “Should I explain the start of the Braypolara books to you now?”

Can't help but notice he wants to explain them to me, not tell me the stories, but I'll take it if it means he stops talking about my apparent minimal contributions to a massive pile of mistakes. “Sure, Reg,” she said with a false smile put on in hopes that he'd be placated. “Go for it.”

In her time on the Baltimore, Anna had viewed some of history's worst musicals; truly bad stories with painful music and nonsensical lyrics. She'd also watched ones considered to be classics of their day that were horrifically laden with racism, sexism, and other jaw-droppingly inappropriate content and themes. She'd watched boring ones that droned on forever and put her to sleep no matter how many times she'd tried to get through them.

But inspecting power conduits while Reg haphazardly attempted to explain what appeared to be a ridiculous set of stories with increasingly incomprehensible and overwrought “plots” where lonely men always managed to be heroes and buxom women devoid of personalities of their own were always ready to serve became both literal and figurative stellar new worsts for Anna in terms of “entertainment”.

Still, she nodded and smiled along as much as she could for a solid half hour before she had to interject to say, “Wow, Reg, that all sounds amazing. Thank you for sharing it with me! But I need to get these readings to engineering now.”

“Don't you want to hear about what Darangya and Atrilda did next?”

“I'm guessing they ended up in bed together. Again.”

“Well...yes. But that's not the important part,” Reg protested.

Anna grinned at him. “How about you save that for next time?”

Reg nodded. “You know what? Good idea. Leave you wanting more. Saelethil does tell his pupils that it’s always best to leave a woman wanting more, after all.”

Anna’s grin turned into a grimace. “Um, yeah. Thanks! Going to engineering now!” she said as she pushed off to slide backwards towards the tube junction.

“Okay. I’ll...um...see you down there soon!” he called after her.

Anna waved, turned to face the vertical tube, and slid the railings down towards Deck Thirty-Six as fast as she could.



Stardate 47226.0 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 11:55) — Main Engineering

Geordi looked up at Data as he returned to engineering. “Better?” he asked.

Data replied, “I do not think so. I remain confused.”

“Me too,” said Anna as she approached both of them. “I’ve inspected everything I can think of and can’t find any reason for the drive to be acting up like this. But I’m confident that it’s not the design upgrades. I’d pretty much stake my life on that.”

There was a small snort of laughter from inside the drive bay. All three of them looked to see Covett grinning maliciously at Anna.

Anna cringed, but Geordi stood and quietly said to her, “Ignore him, please. There’s enough going on right now. I agree with you.” More loudly to both her and Data he added, “All teams have checked in and no faults are currently detected. I’m ready to give it another go in a minute.”

Data nodded and took a seat at the console again while Anna stood behind him.

Geordi sat next to Data and thought to himself, *It’s not the engines going wrong half as much as the people lately!*



Stardate 47226.0 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 12:10) — Bridge

Picard paced back and forth on the bridge between his chair and the forward consoles. Part of him was happy to accept that cutting-edge technology came with hiccups; if a hiccup kept him from the dreaded banquet, then “*Que sera, sera*” as his mother used to sing. But another part of him loathed not having his ship get him where he was supposed to be, even if he didn’t want to go. It felt like a damp wick at both ends of an unhappy candle.

Worf announced, “Captain, incoming message from Admiral Nakamura.”

Picard knew “whatever will be” was not going to be sufficient for the Admiral. He took a deep breath, said, “On screen,” and turned to face the unpleasant music. “Admiral,” he said in as cheerful a tone as he could muster.

Nakamura on the screen irately replied, “*Captain. We were expecting you imminently but the Enterprise isn’t even on long-range sensors yet. Is there a problem?*”

“Actually, we have been experiencing a few minor difficulties with our new warp core, but my chief engineer assures me that we will be under way within the hour.”

“*You’re not trying to avoid this particular engagement, are you, Picard?*”

“No, no, certainly not,” Picard lied affably. “I’m really looking forward to it,” he added with a determined smile.

“*Good. I’ll expect you soon. Nakamura out.*” With that, the Admiral closed the transmission.

Riker came up alongside Picard with a grin. “I think he’s on to you, sir.”

“Hm,” Picard said, twisting his mouth to the side in frustration.

Just then, La Forge's voice came over the comm. "*La Forge to Bridge.*"

"Go ahead, Geordi," Picard replied.

"*We've just started it up, Captain. All systems are holding steady. Ready when you are, sir.*"

Picard pointed forward and ordered, "Ensign Gates, set a course and engage."

But as soon as the ship began to go to warp, it abruptly ceased.



In engineering, Picard's voice demanded over the comm, "*Engineering, report.*"

Data replied, "The warp field has collapsed, sir."

"It looks like we've blown the entire power converter, Captain," La Forge added. "Impulse engines are down too. We're not going anywhere, not even back to Starbase 84."

Anna hurried over to the consoles with a PADD in hand, pointing to something she'd written on the screen about yet another inexplicable series of faults in the warp plasma conduits.

Data frowned, sensing that something about her fault notations seemed familiar in a way that he could not immediately place.

But Geordi read her note and replied quickly to the bridge, "But I know just how to fix this. Give me two, three hours, tops!" He cut off the comm before the Captain could tell him to do it in less time, and sprang to his feet to order his teams back to work on the plasma conduits.



On the bridge, Riker muttered, "Talk about going nowhere fast."

Picard sighed loudly and then said, "Mr. Worf, open a channel to the Venture. Advise Admiral Nakamura I'll be a little later than I thought."

“Aye, sir,” Worf replied.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Stardate 47226.1 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 13:00) — Main Engineering

As Data and Geordi stood in the drive bay trying to realign the warp plasma relays and power converter as teams called in from across the ship, Ensign Tyler suddenly appeared at Geordi's elbow, smiling at him.

Geordi took a deep breath and asked, "Tyler, how're you coming with that relay diagnostic?"

"Almost done, sir," she replied sweetly. Then she pushed her way between them, saying, "Excuse me. I need the plasma inverter," as she reached to take the tool from the shelf below the console they were working at.

As they watched her walk away, Data quietly observed, "It appears Ensign Tyler still has a crush on you. It is clear you did not speak to her."

"No, Data, I haven't had the time." He picked up another tool from the shelf and handed it to Data. "Listen, I want you to take this brace coil and run a metallurgical scan on it for me. See if there are any micro-fractures."

Data took the tool in his hand, pointed downwards. It was eerily similar to the odd knife he had used in his dream to cut the Counselor Troi cake.

Geordi noticed Data's discomfort. "Something wrong, Data?"

"I am reminded of a recent dream," he admitted.

Geordi chuckled and turned to the next console along the wall.

Data began, "This brace is reminiscent of —" but silenced himself when he saw a disturbing mouth-like shape appear on the back of Geordi's neck, full of pointed teeth. The mouth opened long enough to snarl at Data, but then mostly disappeared, leaving only a thin line behind on Geordi's skin.

A significant urge to attack the mouth nearly overcame Data. He took a step back, and then heard the telephone ringing sound again. When he looked around engineering for the source of the sound, all of the other engineers had disappeared. He turned around to the drive bay again and found everyone there had disappeared as well.

Then Commander Riker's voice behind him asked, "Are you going to answer that, Commander?"

Data found Riker standing near the central console table, once again with a glowing, red straw sticking out of the side of his head.

"What are you waiting for? Answer it!" Riker implored, pointing towards Data's torso.

Data looked down at his own chest and was surprised to discover that it had a hatch — right through his uniform — that had never existed before. He opened it and found an ancient, ornate telephone inside himself. Perplexed, he lifted the receiver and slowly brought it to his ear. "Hello?" he said into it.

"*Kill them,*" he heard Freud's voice say over the phone. "*You must kill them all before it's too late.*"



Anna had noticed Data coming out of the drive bay from her seat at the console overlooking it. He was carrying a brace coil, but in an odd way, almost as if he intended to hack at something with it. He also looked confused, possibly even lost.

"Data?" she asked, but he didn't seem to notice her. "Data? Are you all right?"

Data touched his chest with his right hand — still gripping the brace coil — and then moved it to his ear and said, "Hello?"

"Uh yeah, Data, hello?" Anna said, rising to her feet as Geordi and Andrea also noticed something was wrong and approached from the drive bay. "Data, can you hear me?"

Geordi put his hand on Data's shoulder and asked, "Data? Data? What's wrong?"

Data suddenly blinked at both Geordi and the brace coil as if he did not expect either to be there. “I do not know,” he replied, appearing quite baffled.

Geordi gently said, “Maybe you should talk to Counselor Troi about it some more.”

“That seems like a wise idea,” Data said, and then quickly walked out of engineering.

“Is he okay?” Andrea asked.

“I hope so,” Geordi replied with a baffled expression of his own.



Stardate 47226.1 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 13:15) — Counselor Troi’s Office

Data sat opposite Counselor Troi, still holding the brace coil. He explained, “Everything seems to remind me of the nightmare. Objects, sounds, smells. And now I have seen elements of the dream in a waking state. I cannot explain it.”

Troi replied, “Data, if you were one of my human patients, I might be concerned right now. I’d say you had a waking dream or an hallucination. But you’re not human. I think we might be looking at some kind of technological problem.”

Data countered, “I have run three complete self diagnostics and Geordi has scanned me extensively as well. All of my systems are functioning normally.” He looked at the brace coil and touched the tip with his fingers. “Perhaps Doctor Freud was correct. The knife I dreamed about is the embodiment of my unconscious desire to inflict violence.”

Everything Troi knew about Data told her it was unlikely he was capable of harbouring a hidden, violent side. “Data, even Freud said, ‘Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.’”

Data appeared mildly confused.

Recalling some of his other recent unusual questions and behaviour, Troi reconsidered her assessment of a potential technological problem and instead gave voice to a theory that had been much on her mind lately in terms of Data's personal development. "The bottom line is, I think you're developing an almost obsessive interest in your own inner workings. I'd almost call it the beginnings of a neurosis."

"That is not possible."

"Why not? You've eliminated all the technical explanations. And it makes sense that as your neural net becomes more complex, more human, that you might experience the same kind of psychological complexities as a human." *Like probing deeper into the nature of what it means to be friends and taking a vulnerable person under your wing out of the goodness of whatever constitutes a heart for you*, she thought.

Data suddenly appeared hopeful, almost even delighted at the notion. "Do you really think it is possible?"

Troi smiled, knowing how important this sort of advancement would be for him. "Data, you must be the first person who's come into my office and been excited at the prospect of a new neurosis. But yes, I do think it's possible, and I'd like to start counselling you on a regular basis."

"Daily?" Data asked eagerly.

My goodness, he's really changing so rapidly all of a sudden! She chuckled and clarified, "No, we'll start weekly. And as a first step, I'd like you to shut down your dream program until our next session, just to be on the safe side. Give yourself a chance to reflect on this experience."

"Thank you, Counselor. I look forward to our next meeting." With that, he returned to much more typical Data behaviour as he stood, turned, and headed for the door.

"And Data?" Troi called to him. He turned so she handed him the brace coil. "Next time, see me before you see Sigmund."

Data nodded and left.

Troi smiled again, happy for him, but also concerned at the sudden pace of all of these burgeoning new facets to his personality.



Stardate 47226.2 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 13:30) — Picard's Ready Room

“Admiral, I can explain,” Picard said defensively towards his terminal.

“*Let me guess,*” the Admiral replied, clearly irritated. “*Your new warp core is malfunctioning again?*”

“Unfortunately, the problem has affected our impulse systems.” Picard grudgingly admitted, “At the moment, we...are adrift.”

“*Are you expecting to have this problem fixed soon, or shall we send out a tow ship to bring you in?*” Nakamura retorted.

The very notion rankled Picard, but he knew he couldn't let the Admiral see that. As tersely as he dared, he said, “That will not be necessary. I have full confidence in my engineering staff. I will be at the banquet on time. Picard out.” Then he tapped off the communication before Nakamura could insult him further.

Picard glowered at the darkened screen. It felt ridiculous to be putting everyone to such efforts just to hurry him to a banquet he didn't even want to attend; one that would be increasingly uncomfortable the more it got around that the flagship had suffered an embarrassing engine failure.

His defensive mood branched out into an irritability at being unable to visit engineering himself without risking the hurt feelings of a passenger that didn't want anything to do with him. *It's my damned ship*, he thought. He stood, adjusted his uniform, and decided he had every right to go to engineering and monitor the situation in person.

His mood softened along the way as he once again heard Deanna's voice in his head reminding him to respect Anna's boundaries. He realised she was undoubtedly part of the team under stress to fix the engine she'd come aboard to help install. He thought about how anxious she must be, how anxious the entire engineering team must be, and how in his junior days having a senior officer breathing down his neck made unpleasant situations even worse.

As the turbolift slowed just before opening, Picard took a deep breath, reminded himself to approach everyone involved with as much patience and respect as possible, but also that he had a right — even an obligation — to see to it that his ship was in working order. With all of that in mind, he calmly walked into main engineering determined to be a supportive presence, and hoped Anna was elsewhere.



Stardate 47226.2 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 13:40) — Main Engineering

The moment Data had returned to engineering, Anna had turned to him and erupted into an enormous smile despite the continued stress of trying to keep on top of the compounding faults throughout the ship. Anna had then rolled her chair to the side of the console closer to the drive bay doors to allow Data to sit with her as they tried to work out some of the issues together. Data used the console while Anna opened her imaginary screen before her, flicking through how her envisioned systems interacted as they both attempted to theorise how the failures were related and causing multiple cascades in violation of conventional wisdom.

Suddenly, both Geordi and Data were startled out of their concentration when there came a loud rattle from Anna's chair;

before they could even look she'd sprung out of it and started up the walls of the drive bay in a panic.

As Data watched her through the window with a furrowed brow, Geordi turned to see the Captain entering. "Oh no," he muttered quietly, knowing nothing good would come from such a visit. "Better let me take over with that," he said to Data, who nodded and stood to the side, peering up towards the drive bay ceiling.

"How's it coming along, Mr. LaForge?" Picard said as he approached.

"Uh, sir, we're going as fast as we can," Geordi said as he entered the latest testing reports into the new calculations Data and Anna had begun. *I need her down here to finish this, not hiding from the Captain*, he thought.

"Good, good," Picard said with a curt nod.

Geordi hoped Picard would take the hint and leave, but instead he stood there watching everything Geordi did. Whenever Geordi glanced up at him, the Captain smiled encouragingly but made no indication of leaving soon.

Picard crossed his arms while peering over Geordi's shoulder and reading the screen, occasionally making small sounds or comments such as, "Hm," and, "Interesting."

Every time he spoke Geordi had to suppress a cringe and found it increasingly difficult to concentrate. "Really, sir, we're working on it," he said, once more hinting strongly for the Captain to leave them to it.

"I can see that. It does appear to be quite a number of problems overlapping each other."

"Yes, sir, that's exactly the issue," Geordi replied tensely.

Picard crossed his arms again, sighed audibly, then uncrossed his arms once more and leaned forward on the console, pointing to Geordi's PADD. "Have you tried reconfiguring the plasma conduits?" he asked, reaching over Geordi towards the console.

Geordi actually had to put his own hand out to block Picard's access, terrified that he'd make a change to Anna and Data's carefully laid out tables. "Yes, Captain. Over an hour ago."

Picard stood back up, sighed again, and crossed over to Data at the chief engineer's console. "What about the relays?" he asked. "Are you absolutely certain you don't need a new phase inverter?"

Data patiently explained, "I am currently running a level three diagnostic of the relays, sir. We will have the results of the analysis in approximately ten minutes."

With yet another loud sigh, Picard said, "I see," and then turned back to the console Geordi was working at, once more leaning on it for a moment.

Behind them, Data's attention was diverted to the brace coil once again, sitting on the shelf beside him.

Picard stood straight again, clasping his hands behind his back, looking around. "Oh, perhaps I could reconfigure these isolar chips," he suggested, indicating the chip bank wall further along the corner.

Geordi nearly panicked at the notion. He stood quickly and begged, "No, sir, please don't touch that!" With an exasperated sigh of his own, he tried desperately to plead with Picard. "Captain, Commander Data and I have the situation under control. Now, if you'd just let us care of it, the work would go much faster."

Before Picard could reply, Ensign Tyler called out from behind him, "Captain, we could use an extra hand moving the containment pods. If it wouldn't be an imposition," she said with an endearing, deferential smile.

Picard returned the smile, adjusted his uniform, and replied, "Oh, no, not at all. I'd be delighted." He then followed Tyler to where the containment pods were stacked around the corner.

Under his breath, Geordi said, "Good work, Tyler. I thought he'd never leave." He then turned to Data to say, "Data, I want you to give me a hand locking down this plasma conduit —" But Data wasn't there, and neither was the brace coil.

Geordi looked around the fore of engineering and into the drive bay, but there was no sign of him. “Data?” he called, but nobody seemed to have noticed him leaving. “Data?” he called again, but he had disappeared.

Geordi groaned as he thought, *Damn it, I can't get this done if the people I need keep running away!*



Stardate 47226.2 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 13:50) — Deck Eight

Troi remained concerned for Data, so she decided to try to unobtrusively peek into main engineering to see if he was coping all right. She left her office and headed towards the turbolift, pondering Data's burgeoning human traits and hopeful that — with guidance and support — he might be coming closer to several of his personal goals in terms of human experiences.

She smiled a little at the thought of his endearing mannerisms, but as she walked she suddenly had an eerie feeling that she was being followed. She slowed, looked around, saw nothing, and then stopped completely to see if anyone was coming up behind her. When nobody did, she resumed walking, albeit with heightened awareness of her surroundings.

As she reached the turbolift and pressed the call button, she again felt a presence approaching; she gasped and wheeled around, but once more there was nobody there. A chill ran down her spine just as the turbolift opened behind her, startling her.

Troi hurried into the lift car, calling out, “Deck Thirty-Six,” eager to be back amongst other crew again so she could shake off the unpleasant sensation.

As the turbolift doors closed and she took a deep breath to calm herself, suddenly a hand reached through the doors to push them back open, making her jump with fright.

The doors opened to reveal Data there. Troi sighed with relief. “Hello, Data,” she said happily, but then became concerned at the way he was staring at her right shoulder. “Are you all right?”

Data lifted the brace coil into the air over her as if it was a knife.

A fresh chill went through her. “What are you doing?”

Data calmly instructed, “Hold very still, Counselor,” as he stabbed towards her.

Troi screamed, “No!” but was unable to push Data aside as he stabbed her repeatedly. The searing pain combined with panic to send her unconscious.



Stardate 47226.2 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 13:50) — Deck Seventeen

When the Captain had left the bridge, Ensign Gates asked Riker if they could perhaps send the Captain to the banquet via his yacht. Riker had been amused at the Ensign’s attempt to help where Picard clearly didn’t want it, but decided the possibility warranted confirmation that the yacht was just as disabled as the rest of the ship.

He and Worf had gone down to Deck Seventeen to inspect the yacht for both safety and technical concerns, and found that its systems were indeed suffering the same faults.

As they headed to the turbolift to return to the bridge, Worf complained, “Ever since you gave Alexander that music program, he’s been playing it all night, every night.”

“I just wanted to broaden his horizons. Besides, he likes it,” Riker replied.

Worf protested, “It is screeching, pounding, dissonance. It is not music!”

With a wide grin, Riker said, “Worf, it’s better than music: it’s jazz.”

The turbolift doors opened, revealing a horrific scene of Troi on the floor unconscious with a bloody shoulder and Data lurching towards the two men, brandishing an equally bloody weapon towards Riker's head.

Riker defensively blocked Data's blow as Worf grabbed Data and was barely able to subdue him. But in doing so, Data's demeanour suddenly changed; he shifted from an aggressive posture to one of confusion as Worf continued to hold him back.

Riker hurried to Troi's side and tapped his combadge. "Medical emergency! Deck Seventeen, section three alpha."

"We're on our way," came the reply from someone in sickbay.



Stardate 47226.2 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 13:55) — Main Engineering

With Picard safely engaged in assisting Ensign Tyler and the other engineers mostly back on track trying to get the drive up and running — except for Anna, who remained hidden in the conduit ring in the ceiling above the drive — main engineering was a buzzing hive of activity.

Thus when Navarro strode in and called out, "I have a security announcement. Please, may I have your attention," everyone paused in mid-step to turn to her.

She took a deep breath and said, "There has been...an incident. The situation is stable for now but before rumours spread, I've been directed to inform you all that Commander Data has apparently stabbed Counselor Troi with a coil brace."

"Good heavens!" Picard exclaimed as murmurs bubbled through the room.

Navarro lifted her hands in placation. "Yes sir, I know. But as I said, it's all stable. The Commander has been contained by Commander Riker, Lieutenant Worf, and security personnel. He's

had some kind of...malfunction. Or maybe a misunderstanding. Anyway, he's cooperating fully and hasn't tried to hurt anyone else. I've been instructed to report that he is not considered a threat at this time but he is unable to return to engineering. Counselor Troi is in sickbay and expected to recover fully."

"Malfunction?" La Forge asked. "Wait, that's got to be related to his waking dream problem."

Navarro carefully said, "I believe that's the prevailing theory, sir, yes." She turned to Picard and added, "Security has him in the observation lounge awaiting you, sir."

"Understood. Thank you, Lieutenant," Picard replied with a nod. He turned to La Forge and said, "Come with me and bring whatever you need to scan him fully."

"Yes sir," La Forge said, grabbing a tricorder and positronic cable from his station. As he passed Navarro on his way to follow Picard out, he gestured slightly towards the top of the warp core and whispered, "Get Anna down from there if you can."

"Got it," Navarro whispered back. She glanced over her shoulder to watch Geordi and the Captain leave, and then hurried up the ladder to the upper deck around the warp core. From there she tried in vain to see Anna in the conduit ring above; when she couldn't she gently called out, "Anna?"

There was no response.

Aisling sighed, and then noticed Sorenson was standing on the other side of the deck subtly pointing at a particular spot of the ring. She smiled at him appreciatively, they exchanged an understanding nod, and then she moved over closer to that part. "Anna?" she called out again. "Please come down. Nobody's watching. I won't even watch. I'm going back down to the main level. Please come see me. I want to talk to you."

She glanced at David again, noting that he was making a very deliberate show of turning his back.

Aisling went back down the ladder, headed to the central console, and began idly scrolling through the day's security logs the way she used to as part of "buffer time" when she was an

ensign. It felt wrong to be faking being busy when everyone around her was actually busy, but she knew Geordi would want her to get Anna back in the game as soon as possible.

Thus she noticed right away when Anna crept out of the drive bay area and approached her cautiously, her fingers twisting together nervously.

Aisling turned to her with as much of a warm, positive, helpful smile as she could muster, given the stress all around. “Hey there,” she said. “You okay? No wait, that’s a silly question. Of course you’re not. You want me to escort you up to your lab? Or your quarters?”

Anna shook her head, but looked so pale that Aisling wondered if sickbay might be a better option, if Anna wasn’t known to be afraid of sickbay and the saucer section in general.

Anna nodded towards the console where she usually worked. “I’m supposed to be confirming PTC calibrations against the new spec but...” She visibly cringed, reminding Aisling of a turtle trying to pull itself into its shell. “Is he coming back?”

It took Aisling a second to work out who Anna likely meant. “The Captain? I honestly don’t know. Probably not for a bit, at least.”

“Okay,” Anna replied, though she didn’t seem particularly relieved. With a freshly pained expression she asked, “Did I hear you say Data stabbed someone?”

“Yeah, but —”

Before Aisling could clarify, Anna put her hands over her face and looked like she was about to collapse.

“What’s happening?!” Anna cried into her hands desperately. “There isn’t enough twigs and string in the whole universe to fix this!”

Aisling hurried to her side, but resisted the urge to put an arm around her. “Hey, hey, it’s going to be okay. You know what, come on. We’re going to have a nice, calm talk, you and I,” she said, putting very tentative fingertips on Anna’s shoulder to gently guide her out of main engineering and into a nearby meeting room.

Anna plopped helplessly into a chair there and put her head on her hands, elbows on the table. “I thought he was so nice!”

Aisling sat in the chair beside her. “He is nice. Data’s one of the nicest people ever. That hasn’t changed. Don’t panic. We don’t even know why he stabbed Counselor Troi yet but it must have been —”

Anna sat upright suddenly, her eyes filled with fiery rage. “Counselor Troi? What’d she do to him?!”

Even though Aisling had become well aware that Anna wasn’t keen on Troi, she didn’t know why, nor had she suspected Anna was harbouring anything like this level of anger towards her. She stammered, “What? To him? What do...uh...I mean...nothing, as far as I know.” She shook her head to regain her composure. “Look, Geordi’s up there with Data now and he’s going to figure out what’s gone wrong. Any of us can have a mental breakdown and do things we otherwise wouldn’t, right?”

Anna appeared distinctly unimpressed at the notion.

Aisling more carefully suggested, “Imagine someone dosed me up with some kind of psychotropic substance, enough that I didn’t know who or where I was. My basic morality would probably still be intact but I might do something dangerous like dance myself off of a precipice, or imagine that a phaser makes pretty rainbows so I’d shoot it all over to show everyone, or something. That actually happened to someone at the Academy once. Anyway, after the drugs were out of me I’d be horrified at my actions, especially if someone got hurt. Would you stop feeling safe around me after that?”

Aisling expected Anna to say a standard reply of, “Of course not,” so she was shocked when instead Anna said nothing but simply tightened her mouth to one side under a dark glare and grudgingly shrugged.

Shit, Aisling thought. Right, I need to think about who I’m talking to here and stop expecting the usual from someone unusual. She admitted, “Okay, I’m sorry. I’m getting this wrong. I need to remember to put myself in your shoes and think about how hard it

must be for you to trust anyone, given everything you've been through. Because..." She considered the situation, sighed, and hypothesised, "If you were the one that got drugged and fired imaginary rainbow phasers all around, or screwed up something on the warp drive, you wouldn't expect anyone to forgive you or trust you ever again, would you?"

Anna shook her head slowly.

"You wouldn't even forgive or trust yourself."

Anna looked down and shook her head again.

Once again resisting an urge to throw her arms around the traumatised young woman and squeeze her until all the bad things went away, Aisling instead sighed sadly. "Oh, Anna, see that's it right there. That's the crux of it. Nobody's perfect. We all mess up. I know it's hard but you need to figure out a way to learn to trust."

Anna snorted a single, wry, dark little chuckle and then sighed herself.

"I'm not the first to tell you that, am I?" Aisling guessed.

Anna shook her head again, staring down at her reflection in the table. She very quietly said, "I ran away from everyone and everything after I got out of The Institute and nearly died because of it. I thought being around people had turned out pretty bad so I tried to live in the wilderness but that doesn't work if the wilderness is the English moors in autumn."

Aisling instinctively shuddered at the thought, having been to the moors with her family when she was young. "Yeah, those are known for being windswept and cold and rainy. It's a whole trope for literature about the place."

"I didn't know that. I just went where nobody was. I nearly died of exposure out there, and then when I got rescued a lady at the rescue centre told me I'd better learn to trust someone somewhere before I got myself killed."

Aisling's heart hurt at every word. "Yeah," she said, fighting tears.

“I tried,” Anna continued. “But it doesn’t always work. It’s confusing and the worst people are the best at pretending they’re trustworthy.”

Aisling nodded. “That’s sadly true. But Anna, Data isn’t one of those bad guys pretending. I’m not saying you should just let anybody get away with anything. I mean, your instinct not to trust Dean is a good one. He’s an asshole. But your instinct to trust Data is a good instinct. What happened just now with him is a malfunction, same as a human brain going weird temporarily. And just like everyone would support someone having a mental breakdown and get them through it safely for all, everyone’s going to rally around Data and get him through this. You’ll see. It’s going to be okay.”

Anna made no reply, but continued to stare at her reflection on the table.

“Anna, he’s not dangerous to you, no more than I am or any of your new friends are. You can still count on him, I promise.”

Anna looked at Aisling incredulously. “How do you know that? How can you make that promise?”

“Because I know him. I have faith in him. People make mistakes. And yeah, this seems to have been a pretty dangerous mistake but let me be really, horribly blunt: if Data had wanted to kill Counselor Troi, she’d be dead. Not just her but anyone who tried to stop him or restrain him after. Whatever happened, I’m certain in my heart,” she said with both hands patting her chest, “that Data didn’t mean to hurt her. Data adores Counselor Troi. They’re friends. He’d give his life for her, for you, for me, for any of us.

“You need to see this for what it is: some kind of accident, brought on by an error. He’s still Data. He’s up there right now talking it out, probably as baffled as anyone, poor guy. And when Troi’s all patched up she’s going to be first in line to do what she can to help him figure it all out. Data may not have a literal heart but he has the biggest metaphorical one in all of Starfleet. He’s Data, not Lore. You don’t have to be afraid of him.”

Anna blinked in confusion. “Lore? Who’s Lore?”

Aisling wanted to kick herself. *Oh shit, now I’m in it up to my knees.* She took another deep breath and carefully explained, “Lore is...was...Data’s brother.”

“Brother?!” Anna asked, wide-eyed in complete shock.

“Another Soong android, but the exact opposite of Data’s temperament. Mean, spiteful, evil and conniving. Lore’s gotten tons of people killed, bargained with all sorts of bad guys, and kept trying to drag Data into his bullshit. But even when Lore manipulated Data on the mechanical level, Data ultimately resisted because Data is inherently good.”

Anna sat open-mouthed, staring at Aisling for a moment. She then started to try to say several things at once, her face contorting as she stammered half-words in an attempt to comprehend this new information. Then she squeezed her eyes shut, tilted her head to one side, and asked, “How do we know this isn’t Lore that’s come to kill Counselor Troi?”

Holy fucking shit and Saints ahoy, that’s a security nightmare I want no part of, Aisling thought. She explained, “Because Lore’s been deactivated. I believe he’s stored somewhere at Daystrom now, completely inactive and being studied. Or something.”

“So like...dead?” Anna asked tentatively.

“Um, I guess. Kind of. I suppose it’s possible he could be reactivated so...I don’t know, androids are complicated.”

“I thought there was only Data!”

“Yeah, well, as far as we know it’s just Data and Lore but Dr. Soong made other prototypes so...” Aisling shrugged widely, and then waved her hands before her. “The point is, Data is the most pure and wholesome friend any of us will ever have. I am absolutely certain that we’re going to find out he had no conscious intention to hurt Counselor Troi at all, and that he’d never hurt you either. Anna, I would entrust my daughter’s life to data. That’s not something I’d say about everyone on board.”

“You’d trust him with her life, even right now?”

“Well...I mean....we need to figure out what went wrong but honestly yeah, if the need was there even now I’d trust him with her.” Aisling rolled her eyes and admitted, “Honestly I’m not sure if I’d trust her with him, but if anyone could cope with Aoife’s...Aoifeness, it’d be Data. Again, the point is that Data is a good person. He’s good to his core. You watch, once it’s all settled we’ll find out he never meant to hurt anybody, not really.”

Anna slumped and put her head in her hands again. “I don’t know. There’s so much to be done and all of this is just...so hard.”

“Yeah, today isn’t the triumph it should have been. It’s gone weird and awful and this on top of everything is just...well it’s shit. It’s an absolute pile of shit. I get it. You should be celebrating your new drive right now and instead we’re doing all of this,” she said, waving her arms in the air. “But we’re going to get through this together. All of us. Including Data. I’ll sit with you in here if you want to have a good cry about it but then we’re going to go back in there together and I’m going to have your back like always.”

Anna sat up again and wiped a tear from her eye. “I just feel like...it’s all unravelling and I can’t stop it.”

“I know. But we’re going to get this drive stuff sorted. We will. And you’re going to get through this with Data still being someone you can trust. I know it’s hard for you to see that now, but sometimes you have to make room for people to make mistakes, including yourself.

“You know way you felt about Data when he waved across the room and gave you the courage to stand up to Dr. Kiyohira? That was no mistake. That’s the real Data. He’s not two-faced. He’s not like the people who’ve hurt you before. He’s different, and not just because he’s an android. He’s different because he’s so completely good. You feel that. Anyone who spends time with him feels it. He radiates it and he doesn’t even know it. He doesn’t even mean to. It’s just who he is. And whatever made him do what he just did to Counselor Troi, I know in my heart it is a mistake coming from a place of goodness. Please, Anna, please know that too. In fact I

think you do know it and all you need is permission to believe in it.
Do that. Believe in it. Believe in him.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Stardate 47226.3 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 14:10) — Observation Lounge

Data sat at the table opposite Picard. Two security personnel flanked Worf, all behind Data. On either side of Picard stood La Forge and Riker. The mood in the room was weirdly tense; Data's calm demeanour seemed entirely out of place juxtaposed against the shocking fact that he had harmed one of his fellow crew members.

"I believe I had another waking dream, sir," Data explained, his hands palm-down on the table before him as a gesture of obedience and supplication in light of his terrible actions. "But this time, I had an uncontrollable urge to eliminate the image I saw."

"And what you saw was some sort of a mouth on Troi's shoulder?" Picard asked.

"Yes, sir. For a reason I cannot explain, I had the need to destroy it."

"What about me?" Riker asked. "Did you see one of those mouths on my head as well?"

"No, sir. I saw a straw coming out of your head."

Picard exclaimed, "A straw?!"

Data replied, "As I said before, these are all images I originally experienced in my dream program. I do not have a rational explanation for them."

"Mr. La Forge?" Picard asked tersely.

La Forge said, "Captain, we've run every possible diagnostic on Data's positronic net we can think of. We can't find anything wrong. I could run a sub-polymer scan, but it would take some time to set up the equipment," he suggested.

“Make it so. In the meantime, Mr. Data, I’ll have to relieve you of duty and confine you to your quarters,” Picard said. His tone was firm and officious, but not unfriendly.

“A sensible precaution, sir,” Data agreed before rising and allowing the security staff to escort him to his quarters.



Stardate 47226.3 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 14:15) — Sickbay

Deanna stirred on the biobed, calling Data’s name in confusion.

Beverly rushed to her side to calm her, taking her hand.

“Deanna, you’re in sickbay. It’s all right.

“Data,” Deanna repeated.

“He’s not here. Just try to relax.” Beverly scanned a medical device that was affixed to Deanna’s shoulder. “This vascular pad has healed the wound, but you’ve lost a lot of blood so I would like you to lie still for a while.” As she removed the pad, she was perplexed to discover a mark underneath it. “That’s odd. There shouldn’t be any discolouration after the treatment. This looks like some sort of rash.”

“What is it?” Deanna asked.

Beverly scanned the wound site with the tricorder again. “I’m picking up cellular degradation. But it doesn’t appear to be related to the lacerations. There’s also some kind of residual interphasic signature.” She paused, thought for a moment, and then called to the man behind her, “Nurse, bring me an interphasic scanner. I want to take a closer look at this.”

The man nodded and went to fetch the scanner as Beverly continued to examine the strange mark.



Anna tried to concentrate on the task at hand, but her mind was a swirling fog of too much stress from too many sources. The incoming reports and scans all matched the spec, so once again there was no valid reason for the drive and power problems, yet she could find no solution. She was beginning to feel like an abject failure at the one thing she considered herself good at, on top of clearly failing to understand Data despite Aisling's words of praise for him.

Everything is wrong. Everything is broken. I don't want to be here anymore, but I don't want to be anywhere else either, she thought. I'm tired of all of this. I want to crawl under a thousand heavy blankets and never come out again.

Through the window to the drive area, she saw Reg taking scans. He grinned awkwardly at her and waved. Anna tried to smile politely back but knew she was failing.

I am terrible at everything. Data waved at me and made me feel strong, Reg waves at me and I feel weird about it. But Data stabbed someone and as far as I'm aware Reg hasn't done that. Nothing makes sense. I am clueless and stupid and exhausted and the whole universe stinks.

She looked back down at her console and sadly sang in her own mind, *I'm always chasing rainbows, watching clouds drifting by. My schemes are just like all my dreams: ending in the sky. Some folks look and find the sunshine; I always look and find the rain. Some folks make a winning sometimes, I never even make a gain. Believe me, I'm always chasing rainbows, waiting to find a little bluebird in vain.*

Another set of reports came in. Anna checked them over and once more found no issue that could cause the errors throughout the drive and ship. She sighed.

“Not having the most successful day, are you?” came a gleefully snarky voice from the other side of the room.

As Anna turned to confirm her suspicion that it was Dean, Aisling snapped from the central console, “Hey Dean? No.”

He laughed in her direction, but all of a sudden Reg was behind him blustering, “You...you just...can’t you do something productive for a change?”

Dean turned in surprise to Reg. “What? Are you actually lecturing me on getting things done?”

“If you two are bored, I will happily dump another task list on each of you,” David boomed from the drive bay.

Dean sneered at all of them, but dropped the topic. However, when Reg responded by weirdly preening at Anna — as if he’d somehow defended her — a malicious grin slowly spread over Dean’s face. He chuckled and shook his head.

Aisling marched over to Anna’s side — blocking her view of both men — and handed her a PADD. “Here are some more reports for you,” she said.

Anna took the PADD in confusion, then read the screen. It said: *“Ignore the boneheads. They’re not worth your time or energy.”*

Anna nodded, deleted the message, and smiled a little up at Aisling. “Thanks. I’ll get on that.”

Aisling nodded back and returned to the central console.

After a moment of quiet work, Dean started back up again by saying, “To think, some people talk about having whole crews of them.”

“Crews of who?” Reg asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Androids,” Dean replied.

“Oh, I thought maybe you meant superior officers,” Aisling said with a clear tone of warning.

Dean chuckled again. “Still, there’d be benefits I guess, if you can cope with the occasional stabbing. No need to clean air processing units, at least.”

Anna rolled her eyes. “Nope, you’d still have to scrub those.”

Dean condescendingly replied, “Not if you don’t use them in the first place.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” Anna asked flatly, suspecting she knew where this was going and keen to let him dig himself in.

“Because androids don’t breathe,” Dean explained, crossing his arms as if he’d won.

Anna slowly brought her finger to her ear and tapped it. “I’m pretty sure Data finds sound waves convenient. Air’s useful for more than respiration, you know. But basic physics does seem to keep confusing you. I can recommend some lesson modules to brush up on your skills, if you’d like.”

Dean’s mouth dropped open as he appeared to be about to retort, but after a series of irritated grunts, he stormed out of the main engineering area entirely as several people in the room quietly laughed.

Aisling sauntered back over to Anna. “I love it when you outsmart him.”

Anna shrugged. “It’s hardly a great triumph.”

“Ooo!” Aisling said with more laughter all around.

Turning back to her console, Anna said, “I just don’t like it when people keep acting like Data’s not a person like any of us. I don’t know what’s going on with him and I’m realising I didn’t know him as well as I thought I did, but he’s still a person and like you said, a high-ranking officer. Even if bad stuff is happening, I’m not going to let anybody prattle on about him like he’s just equipment.”

Aisling nodded. “Exactly. It’s pathetic when certain people are threatened by him, or by you for that matter.”

Anna drolly replied, “‘Certain people’ ought to be more threatened by their lack of scientific knowledge.”

“Ooo!” Aisling said again, clapping her hands. She leaned closer and said softly, “See? You’ll get through this. Everyone in here is on your side.”

Anna wasn’t sure if that was a good thing since she still felt like a failure, but she tried to take some solace in the fact that she was

indeed still a better engineer than Dean Covett, even if she considered that a very low bar of achievement. But the compounding issues weighed nonetheless heavily upon her and she found herself questioning if she really belonged on the Enterprise after all.



Stardate 47226.3 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 14:20) — Data's Quarters

Data entered his quarters with Worf close behind. The other two security officers remained outside.

“Commander,” Worf said with a hint of deference. “I will have to confiscate your sidearm.”

Data nodded. “Of course.” He went to his desk, fetched his phaser, and handed it to Worf. “May I ask a personal favour?”

“Yes.”

Data turned to Spot on the couch. “Will you take care of Spot for me?”

Worf regarded Spot uneasily. “Your animal?”

“I am afraid if I have another waking dream, I might injure her,” Data admitted.

“Of course. Spot, come here!” Worf ordered.

Data gave Worf a dubious look. “Unlike a canine, Spot does not respond to verbal commands,” he said as he went to the couch to pick Spot up. He gave her a couple of pets and then handed her to Worf.

Spot mewed in protest as Worf held her awkwardly in his hands at arm's length.

Data earnestly said, “Goodbye, Spot.” But as Worf turned to carry her out, Data grabbed his arm. “She will need to be fed once a day. She prefers feline supplement number twenty-five.”

“I understand,” Worf said, clearly wishing to hold the cat as little as possible.

But Data would not let go of Worf's arm. "And she will require water. And you must provide her with a sand box." Worf nodded and once more tried to leave, but Data's hold remained firm. "And you must talk to her. Tell her she is a pretty cat, and a good cat," Data said devotedly to Spot until he noticed Worf's growing discomfort and ire.

"I will feed her," Worf said darkly.

Data nodded. "Perhaps that will be enough," he said as he let go of Worf's arm.

Worf headed towards the door, sneezing loudly as he left, prompting another unhappy meow from Spot.

Data stood in place for a moment, unsure what he should do next. He did not like Spot's absence. He did not like that he had harmed Counselor Troi. He had not liked the way the Captain had looked at him, though he understood it entirely. He did not like that the ship was in the middle of a significant technical challenge with which he was no longer able assist.

Recalling the engine failure escalated his omnipresent running concern for Anna into his primary thoughts. He presumed this must all be very stressful for her and calculated a high likelihood that she was blaming herself for the failures that clearly had nothing to do with her formulae and designs, based on her predilection for self-blame even when logic and facts indicated otherwise. He wished he could take her for a break to the arboretum or holodeck, or even simply speak with her.

But even the slightest possibility that he might harm her as he had Counselor Troi disturbed him. He frowned deeply, noting that his level of concern about that possibility was higher even than that of harming Spot. It was entirely logical to him that he would experience a desire to protect Anna — given all she had been through and her willingness to rely upon him — but discovering that there was an undefinable intensity to this need confounded him.

Data began to run further self-diagnostics to once more attempt to discern why Anna provoked such extraordinary responses from

him, but the door chime forced him to push that process into the background and return his primary attention to the present situation.

“Enter,” he said.

A short, frail-looking elderly lady in a security uniform entered, her hands clasped behind her back, her long, grey hair in a simple bun, and a warm, endearing smile upon her face. “Hello, sweetheart,” she said cheerily.

“Hello Lieutenant Niven,” Data replied. “I must warn you, I am under confinement at the moment and may be quite dangerous.”

“Oh, I know my dear. I’m one of your guards now.”

“Ah. I see.”

With an affectionate sparkle in her eyes, she said, “I also know you’re a very kind and sweet young fellow, and whatever’s going on is some kind of error that I’m sure will be fixed soon.”

“Thank you. Hopefully that is the case.”

“Well now that’s why I wanted to pop in and let you know I’m on the job, keeping you safely tucked away. Normally I’d have brought a pie but I know you aren’t often keen on eating.”

“I appreciate the thought. Thank you.”

“Of course. Now, don’t you fret about a thing. You’re not getting past that door no matter what that amazing brain of yours comes up with,” she said with a playful wag of her finger at him.

“I appreciate your attempt at reassurance, however, I am concerned that if I experience another dissociative state, I could become dangerous even to you.”

“Oh, honey,” she said as she stepped up to him and gently patted his cheek. “If I think you’re trying to get past me I’ll stop you faster than a Benzite sling beast.”

Data performed a quick calculation. “That is indeed very fast. But I am concerned you are not accounting for my strength beyond human parameters.”

“Now Data, don’t be silly! Of course I’m accounting for that. Between your brother’s shenanigans and Wolf 359 I’ve practiced out a whole range of ways to deal with those of you with

mechanical enhancements.” She took his left hand between hers and sweetly said, “My darling android boy, Granny Betty-Rose will have you in pieces before you know what’s what. But all nicely done so Geordi can put you back together, don’t you fret.” She gave his hand a maternal squeeze. “I know everyone’s Achilles’ heel. That’s my job and I’m good at it.”

“Indeed you are.”

With a shockingly fast flick of her wrist, she popped his off and gave his hand to him. “See?”

Data’s brow went up. “Hm. That is very impressive.” He snapped his wrist back into place and wiggled his fingers to ascertain restored function.

“Thank you, dear. As I said, you’re a sweet fellow. I’ll be right out here if you need anything,” she said as she once again clasped her hands behind her, turned, and walked towards the door.

“Thank you.”

She turned to give him another warm smile, and then left.

“Hm,” Data said again, satisfied that the legendary Granny Betty-Rose — one of Starfleet’s most decorated security officers and undefeated competitive pie-baker — may in fact be able to contain him if he once again lost control. With that in mind, he picked up his violin from the shelf, selected a book of sheet music, and began to play.



Stardate 47226.3 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 14:20) — Sickbay

As soon as Picard and Riker entered sickbay, Crusher said, “Captain, we have a problem. Take a look at this.” She led them to Troi who was asleep on the biobed. “Her tissue is breaking down on a cellular level and it’s spreading. At first I thought it was a rash from the coil brace she was stabbed with, but when I used the interphasic scanner, I found this.”

Crusher then held the scanner over Troi's injured shoulder. The blue light emanating from it highlighted a multicoloured, worm-like creature with multiple tendrils extending from its body into Troi's.

"What is it?" Picard asked with revulsion.

"The question is, what are they?" Crusher replied as she waved the scanner over her own arm. Suddenly there appeared another of the creatures, partially obscured by her sleeve but almost certainly penetrating her skin underneath.

Both Picard and Riker appeared duly concerned.

Crusher continued, "I've tested all the medical staff and I've found them on almost everyone so far. The cellular decay is accelerating in all cases. I haven't found a way to stop it or even slow it down," she said as she scanned Riker, eventually showing one of the creatures on the side of his head. "Looks like you're infected too. The organisms appear to be attached to our epidermal layers with osmotic tendrils. They're tapping directly into the bloodstream." Her scanner also showed one on Picard's throat. "And from what I can tell, they're spreading."



Stardate 47226.3 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 14:45) — Observation Lounge

After more research on the creatures, the remaining senior staff gathered to discuss their findings.

Riker asked, "What are we dealing with here? Are these creatures feeding on us?"

"Yes, in a very particular way," Crusher replied, standing beside the wall console where she'd placed a diagram and all available information about the creatures. "They appear to be extracting our cellular peptides. It's roughly analogous to the way Terran leeches consume haemoglobin. If they're not removed soon, our bodies are

going to lose all their cellular cohesion. We'll collapse into nothing but a few pounds of chemicals," she said as she approached the table.

Picard turned his chair around to face the others as Crusher leaned on it behind him. "All right. Is there any way that we can affect these organisms?" he asked.

"We've tried EM radiation, subspace fields, thermal protons, nothing's worked," La Forge replied. "They seem to exist in some sort of interphasic state, just beyond our range of visual and sensor acuity, including my VISOR. The only way we can see them is to use an IP scanner. Tricorders can't even pick them up."

Riker asked, "Do we know where these things came from, Mr. Worf?"

"I scanned the vicinity with an IP scanner. There is no sign of any similar creatures, or any unusual interphasic activity."

"What about Mr. Data?" Picard asked. "There must be some connection between his odd behaviour and these creatures. Is he infested as well?"

"No. I scanned him, but I found nothing," Crusher said.

Picard said, "Data attacked Counselor Troi because he saw...a mouth on her shoulder. And in that same area that we first saw one of the organisms."

Riker suggested, "Data also saw a straw in my head and then Beverly discovered an organism in the same place."

"Those images are all part of Data's dream," La Forge recalled. "Maybe somehow he's unconsciously perceiving these creatures."

Picard nodded. "Then perhaps it is time that we took a closer look at Mr. Data's dreams."



Picard and La Forge sat on Data's couch with him facing them while seated in a chair.

"It is an interesting hypothesis," Data said. "If I am being affected by these interphasic creatures on an unconscious level, it may also explain my waking dreams, and my subsequent anti-social behaviour."

La Forge explained, "What we want to do, Data, is link your neural net into the holodeck and have you activate your dream program, so as you dream we can observe the dream images."

Picard added, "Perhaps we can learn more about these creatures by interpreting the symbols and images of your dreams."

"I see. The concept is similar to the method of directed dreaming," Data replied.

"Exactly," Picard said. All three stood as Picard asked La Forge, "How soon can you have the link ready?"

"We'd need about an hour to establish all the interface parameters," La Forge estimated.

"Make it so." Picard turned back to Data and tried to appear genial as he said, "In the meantime, Mr. Data, I suggest that you should prepare for bed."

Data nodded.



Stardate 47226.5 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 16:00) — Holodeck Three

With Data seated beside the holodeck's arch, La Forge finalised linking the cable from an opened portion of Data's head to the control console.

"I think we're ready, Captain," La Forge said. "The link is active. The holodeck has been calibrated to Data's neural net."

Picard gave a nod to the two security guards standing by the door; they stepped outside. He then asked, "Ready, Mr. Data?"

"Yes, sir," Data replied.

As genially as possible, Picard said, “Normally, I would wish you pleasant dreams, but in this case, bad dreams would be more helpful.”

“I understand, sir. Initiating dream program. Stand by.” Data closed his eyes.

A moment later, the holodeck’s walls and arch faded and were replaced by an image of a corridor somewhere else aboard the Enterprise.

“Let’s be very observant,” Picard said to La Forge. “Even the most insignificant image could be a very important symbol.”

“Right,” La Forge replied.

Data came slowly walking around the corner.

“Here he comes,” Picard noted.

Data paused his gait beside them, said, “Hello,” and then kept walking.

“Can we speak to Data directly or would that wake him up?” Picard asked as they began to follow him.

“He should be perceiving us as just another part of his dream. Anything we say to him will be taken in that context.”

A ringing noise began to echo from further down the corridor.

“You know, that sounds like an antique telephone ringer, but I don’t see a receiver,” Picard said.

Data turned another corner that suddenly opened up into Ten Forward, though the corridor layout didn’t match the outside of the real Ten Forward at all. Picard and La Forge exchanged a surprised look not only to find themselves there, but at the odd scenes within.

To their left was a table with an unconscious Troi laying upon it, though her body was only partially there and made out of cake. To their right sat Riker and Crusher, with the latter slurping a glowing, red liquid out of the former’s head via a straw. Further along sat Worf, eating a slice of cake that matched Troi’s cake body. In the distant corner by the windows there sat a huddled figure in a blue and white gingham dress, their face hidden behind their arms over their knees.

Picard asked, “Who is that over there?”

La Forge peered across the distance. “I...I’m not sure, Captain. Wait a second,” he added, looking more closely and noticing that where at first it had looked like the person’s right leg was hidden under their left, it was actually missing from below the knee. “Based on that leg, I’m guessing it’s Anna? But I’ve never seen her in a dress like that.”

Picard’s gut clenched. He hadn’t been prepared to deal with Anna at all, nor had it occurred to him that Data would incorporate her into his dreams, let alone in such a starkly frightened-looking way. He began to walk towards her, desperately wanting to talk to her even though it wasn’t really her. But as he passed Troi’s table Data lifted a plate with some of the cake on it and held it up to hm.

“Cake?” Data said as he offered the plate to Picard.

“Oh, er, thank you,” Picard said awkwardly, accepting the plate from Data but with absolutely no intention of eating it.

Data then lifted a coil brace and began to use it like a knife on the cake, cutting along the side of an already missing piece of Troi’s shoulder.

“Look at that,” Picard said, eager to return to the point of the exercise. “Her right shoulder. That is the same place that Data stabbed her,” he said as Data cut another piece.

“In his waking dream he said that there was a mouth on her shoulder,” La Forge recalled.

“They’re both symbols of consumption. Mouth, food.” He held the plate towards Data and asked, “Mr. Data, what kind of cake is this?”

“It is cellular peptide cake,” Data dutifully replied.

From behind them Worf added, his mouth full, “With mint frosting.”

“Cellular peptides. That’s exactly what the creatures are extracting,” La Forge said.

Picard nodded, and then pointed back to the corner behind Worf, where Anna still huddled, rocking herself like a frightened child. “Geordi, is that a force field over that corner of the room?”

La Forge inspected the area with another VISOR setting. “Uh yeah, it is. Weird, because Ten Forward doesn’t have field emitters in that location.” He took a few steps closer and reported, “She’s got a PADD in her hand. It’s got some kind of graph on it but it’s unlabelled. It’s strange too...not any readout I’m familiar with. But it’s definitely registering a low level of something.”

Hoping to have La Forge engage with her, Picard began, “Perhaps you should try to —”

“Will someone answer that damn ringing!” Riker interjected from the bar. When La Forge and Picard turned their attention to him instead, he added, “Captain, the ringing is getting worse.”

Picard, La Forge, and Data all approached Crusher and Riker.

“What could the ringing symbolise? A bell? Sound?” Picard asked La Forge, with Data standing between them. “An old-fashioned way of communicating?”

Crusher politely offered the straw protruding from Riker’s head to them. “Do you want some? It’s delicious.” She then resumed drinking it herself.

“Will somebody please get that!” Riker demanded.

La Forge realised the sound was coming from Data. He leaned closer to confirm it was within Data’s chest, and then tapped open a panel that both he and Picard knew did not exist on Data at all in reality. The panel revealed a large cavity inside of Data with a shelf, upon which was one of the earliest types of telephones.

La Forge lifted the receiver and tentatively put it to the side of his head as he’d seen done in historical engineering records. “Yes?” he asked. Then he held it forward to the Captain and said, “It’s for you.”

Picard took it and put it to his ear. “Picard.”

A voice on the other side with a thick German accent said, “*Kill them.*”

“Kill who?”

“*Kill them, before it is too late.*”

“Who is this?” Picard demanded, feeling a chill go through him.

Suddenly the entire scene changed. Data disappeared from between them along with the telephone, and Picard and La Forge found themselves standing before a large, wooden desk in an ornate office.

A man sat behind the desk, holding a cigar in one hand and a telephone receiver in the other. In a voice that matched that of the phone call, he said, "I am Doctor Sigmund Freud." Freud learned forward to hang up his telephone.

Picard and La Forge looked around the room and discovered Data lying stiffly and silently on a couch on the opposite side.

La Forge pointed to Freud. "How does he fit into all this?"

Freud replied, waving the cigar about, "If I were to interpret my own appearance in this dream, I would say I am the symbolic representation of Data's unconscious mind trying to warn him about the dangers he perceives around him." He then put the cigar in his mouth.

"You mean the interphasic organisms," Picard suggested.

"Of course," Freud said drolly.

"Tell me, Doctor, how do we kill them?" Picard asked.

Freud lifted the cigar as he pondered an answer, but the telephone began to ring again. Freud said simply, "Answer it."

Picard began to reach for the telephone.

Freud scolded, "Nein, nein, nein!" He rose to his feet. "Do not be so literal. When I say answer it, I mean respond to it, to them," he explained, wagging the cigar.

Just then, the office door opened and workmen dressed in old-fashioned attire came in. One shouted, "Be quiet!" and then lifted a gun to shoot Freud in the chest.

A soft little scream came from under a table at the right side of the room.

Freud groaned, sat in his chair, and appeared to go unconscious.

Picard leaned over to look at the table; there again was Anna, still in the blue and white gingham dress, still huddled with her face hidden, crammed under the table in a futile attempt to hide.

He reached out and found another force field was in place, blocking him from even approaching the table.

Meanwhile the workers went to the other side of the room, lifted the couch with Data on it, moved it out of the way, removed a tapestry from the wall to reveal a glowing red conduit in a hole in the wall behind it, and then began hacking at the conduit with mining tools.

“What do they represent?” Picard asked.

“I don’t know, but I do recognise that junction they’re working on,” La Forge replied. “It’s one of the primary plasma conduits we installed with the new warp core.”

“Freud said to respond to them? What does that mean?” Picard asked.

“What is it that you’re doing?” La Forge asked the workmen.

“Go away. Leave us alone,” the one who had shot Freud growled.

“Who are you?” Picard demanded.

All three workmen turned their tools towards La Forge and Picard. The lead one snarled, “We are your enemies.”

As the two backed away, Data rose up from the couch behind the workman to shout, “Stop! You must not hurt my friends.” Then Data opened his mouth and emitted an unpleasant, high-pitched sound.

The workmen cringed and turned their tools towards Data instead, once more shouting, “Be quiet!”

Data closed his mouth and the noise stopped.

Picard quickly said, “Data, the shrieking noise you made: it causes them pain.”

Data opened his mouth again to once more make the sound, this time sustaining it as the workman desperately shouted, “Be quiet!” Gradually, the workmen faltered and fell to the ground unconscious.

The noise discontinued. Data said, “I believe I understand.”

Picard tried to turn back to Anna in the corner, but before he could do so Data closed his eyes and ceased the dream. The three

of them were once more in a bare holodeck as Data opened his eyes — still seated in the chair — and said, “Geordi.”

“Yes, Data?”

“You must adjust my positronic sub-processor to emit an interphasic pulse.”

La Forge went to the console as Picard knelt beside Data. “Data, what’s going on?”

“The workmen in my dreams represent the organisms which are trying to demolish the ship. The incessant ringing of the telephone and Freud’s cautions at the other end were warnings of the dangers around us,” Data explained as La Forge began to tweak settings on the side of his opened head.

“What about the shrieking noises that you made?”

“My positronic sub-processor detected high frequency interphasic signatures from the organisms, which were symbolically represented in my dreams by a high shriek.”

“When you made those noises, the workmen reacted in pain,” Picard said.

“That is why I have asked Geordi to adjust my sub-processor. If I can produce a high frequency interphasic pulse, it may have a similar effect on the creatures.”

“We’re ready,” La Forge said.

Picard tapped his combadge. “Picard to sickbay. Beverly, we’re going to be sweeping the ship with a high frequency IP pulse. Will you monitor the creatures for any response?”

“*Understood*,” came Crusher’s voice over the comm.

Picard nodded to La Forge, who pushed a controller switch in Data’s head. Another high-pitched noise emanated throughout the ship, quickly escalating beyond human hearing.



In sickbay, Crusher held the IP scanner over Troi’s shoulder, illuminating the creature attached there, watching as it withered

and died. She then pointed the scanner at the one on her arm and confirmed that one was also crumbling.

“It’s working, Captain,” she reported over the comm.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Stardate 47226.6 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 16:45) — Main Engineering

Once it was confirmed that all of the creatures had been eliminated, Picard sent Data back to his quarters with the security guards just to follow protocol even though he believed there was no longer any risk. He and La Forge then proceeded to engineering, where La Forge took him to one of the primary conduits coming off of the warp drive.

“Captain, this is what was in Data’s dream. It was one of the pieces manufactured at Starbase 84 using the new interphasic fusion process, but the base components were manufactured on Thanatos Seven. I believe if we trace all the components from that system we’ll track down the source of the infestation. I also think that’s why we couldn’t get the core online and kept having repeated failures that made no sense; the creatures were disrupting the plasma flow but we had no way to detect them.”

“We’re already beginning system repairs now that we know what’s going on, sir,” reported Sorenson on the other side of the warp core.

“Excellent, Lieutenant,” Picard replied. He asked La Forge, “How long before we have warp power again?”

La Forge began to lead him away from the conduit. “Well, we’re going to have to manufacture a temporary new conduit until the Starbase can clean out their infestation and make us a new one. We can have the temporary one in place in about...six hours,” La Forge estimated.

“Six hours?” Picard asked with mild surprise. “There’ll be no chance of making it to the Venture in time for the banquet at that point. That’s very unfortunate.”

“I can try and speed things up a bit,” La Forge offered, but did not sound hopeful about it.

Picard hastily responded, “No, no, no. Uh...” Picard took a deep breath and carefully said, “I wouldn’t want to sacrifice the safety of the ship. Take as much time as you need, testing through the night if you have to.”

“Understood, sir,” La Forge said.

Picard nodded, and then left engineering.



Once Picard was gone, Aisling hurried to Geordi’s side to say, “We were in the thick of it when you all discovered the creatures. Mostly everyone was relieved to have an answer but Anna was pretty upset. She was trying to make sense of it when you two got down here and —”

“Let me guess, she’s up there again?” Geordi said, nodding his head towards the upper conduit ring.

“Yeah. I think I’ve learned how to get her to come down; just loudly make it clear the Captain’s gone and we’re not watching her.”

“Okay, do that,” Geordi said. “I’ll assign the repair and reconstruction teams.”

Geordi sat at his console. A few minutes later Anna appeared, wringing her hands, looking entirely exhausted.

“Hey there,” he said, rising to talk to her. “You heard what’s up?”

Anna nodded.

“See? I told you it wasn’t your design. None of us could have known it was weird, interphasic worm things eating the plasma and us.”

Anna twitched and cringed. “They’re definitely gone now?”

Aisling came up on her other side. “Absolutely. Sickbay sent someone to scan us while you were...while you weren’t available.

We can get you scanned too, if you want, but they said that noise killed all of them off.”

Anna shook her head and pulled her arms up defensively against herself.

“My offer still stands to take you up to your quarters, if you want,” Aisling said gently.

Anna shook her head again. “I can get there on my own.”

“Yeah, go rest up,” Geordi said. “We’ve got this under control now. It’s all going to be fine now, I’m sure of it. Let us do the heavy lifting, and then you can come back this evening or even tomorrow morning to see your work in action. Because your work is still key here, Anna. Even with all of this nonsense, I haven’t forgotten that.”

Anna appeared unconvinced. She smirked a paltry attempt at a smile, and then scurried over to the vertical Jefferies tube.

Aisling sighed loudly. “This sucks. She should have had a celebration tonight.”

“I’m not sure Anna likes celebrations all that much,” Geordi said, recalling that he’d heard she’d left his birthday party upset about something there, and that was right after she came aboard. He’d never seen her at any party since. “But yeah, she deserved better than this. We’ll find a way to make it up to her later.”



Stardate 47226.6 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 17:05) — Anna’s Quarters

Anna entered her quarters, plopped onto the couch, put her head in her hands, and wept. After a few minutes, she kicked off her leg — letting it roll under the table and not caring about its maintenance at all — and curled up into a sad little ball with her head on the armrest, her tears soaking into the fabric.

Everything's horrible, all of it in the whole universe, she thought. Why can't I ever have something that's good and stays good? What did I do to deserve this all the time?

A bitter, ugly little voice deep in her mind reminded her that she was born unwanted and would always be unwanted.

She squeezed her eyes shut and whimpered at the notion. For all that she didn't believe things like fate, destiny, and curses were real because none of them made the least bit of scientific sense, it was hard to convince herself that something about being unwanted from conception to birth and beyond wasn't the start of a lifelong curse. *Like the universe itself doesn't want me here, she thought, as she often had before.*

Anna sighed and sat up, noticing the duffel bag that was still sitting on the chair on the other side of the room. She'd never gotten around to putting it away in the thirty-nine days she'd been on board.

They said in engineering that once we're moving again, we'll go back to Starbase 84, she recalled. Maybe...maybe I should just get off there. I know the place, at least. I can decide what I want to do after that.

She briefly considered returning to work with the team there, but wrinkled her nose and shook her head. *Not without Dr. Cortez keeping the mean ones at bay.* It then occurred to her that she didn't really want to go back to working with Dr. Cortez either.

With another forlorn sigh, she stood and used the rope hand-holds she'd installed on the ceiling to hang and hop herself along into the bedroom, where she then stood looking at the drawers that held her sparse possessions. She turned, noted her beloved butterfly pyjamas were on the bed, and decided she'd shower, put those on, and try to sleep soon. But first she turned back to the drawers, opened them, took everything out except for clothes for the next day, and then hopped without using the hand-holds over to the duffel in the main room.

With fresh tears flowing, she angrily shoved everything into the bag. Then she glared at it as sobs tried to take over her body, which

only angered her further. *I shouldn't have to go, she thought. I like it here. Mostly. Sometimes.*

Anna growled loudly, took the items out of the bag, hopped back into the bedroom, and threw them back in the still-open drawers. She put her hands on her hips and glared into the distance. *I don't want to go back to Earth. Well I do; I want the grass and the trees and the sunshine again. But I don't want to work with the same people there. It wasn't like here. I was useful but not wanted for me, only what I could do. People here like me...don't they?*

An anguished sob burst out. Anna fell back onto the bed, arms outstretched, desperately wanting some kind of sign as to what she should do.

If I stay, that Captain MeanieGuts is going to keep coming around, and eventually he'll see me and say the Worst Words, and then I'll probably curl into a singularity and die on the spot. I thought maybe Data would somehow protect me from that, but who's going to protect me from Data if he goes around stabbing people he supposedly likes? Aisling says she has my back but she won't against the Captain. Nobody will. Someone will figure it all out and it'll all explode and be horrible. I was stupid to come here. I was stupid to think that meeting the man my father defended would somehow make me feel better about him not bothering to come rescue me. I don't feel better. I feel...so...lost.

Once again she curled into a ball and cried, her only solace the fact that she hadn't eaten in so long that there was nothing in her to throw up.

But once the tears subsided again — leaving her utterly drained and unable to make any long-term decisions — she sat up, wiped her face on her cuffs, and looked once more to her belongings in the open drawers.

If I pack everything up, I can leave quietly without anybody noticing once we get to Starbase 84. I won't have to explain anything. I can just go. Or I can decide not to go and unpack again. But having the bag packed will make it easier to leave. I should pack now and decide tomorrow when we get there.

Anna stood again, this time retrieving the items with greater care and folding them all properly into the bag. As she went back and forth she softly sang, *“Call in three months’ time and I’ll be fine, I know. Well maybe not that fine, but I’ll survive anyhow. I won’t recall the names and places of each sad occasion...”*

She chuckled bitterly and thought, *Oh yes I will. I don’t know how to forget things. I wish I could.*

She continued packing and singing, *“But that’s no consolation here and now. So what happens now? Another suitcase in another hall. Take your picture off another wall.”*

Anna paused and turned her head towards her lab next door. *I should tidy it up. Do I keep the picture Data made me?* It hurt her deeply to think about how happy she’d been in the arboretum with him as he pretended to be an ancient printing machine, drawing a tree for her. *A friend like that was too good to be true.*

She concluded it was best to leave the decision about keeping the picture or not to the next day as well, and continued packing what was already in her quarters. *“Where am I going to? I’ll get by, I always have before. Where am I going to?”*

Anna finished what she could pack for now, hopped a step back from the bag, and said to herself flatly, *“Don’t ask anymore.”*



Stardate 47226.6 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 17:10) — Picard’s Ready Room

Picard leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath to try to release the stress of the day. A weirdly malfunctioning warp drive had certainly not been a preferred method to avoid the Admirals’ Banquet, yet he acknowledged silently to himself that missing it was a silver lining.

Interphasic creatures, he thought. I prefer the discovery of new life forms that don’t try to eat us or my ship. Unpleasant-looking

things, too. He shuddered slightly at the memory of his brother Robert flinging millipedes at him when they were boys, but then smiled at the related memory of his vengeance at putting stink bugs in Robert's room.

Thinking of family brought back the image of the young woman in the gingham dress from Data's dream. *Was Geordi right? Was that Anna?* he wondered. *Geordi seemed to scarcely recognise her other than by her missing leg. We never saw her face. If that was her, what does it mean? Why is that Data's dream interpretation of her?*

Picard wanted to ask Data directly, but something about the shielded nature of that aspect of the dream felt deeply personal. He pondered if perhaps the force fields weren't to protect Anna — or whomever she was — but rather to keep him and Geordi out of that part of Data's mind.

Or was it a symbolic way of Data keeping such thoughts out of his own conscious mind? We've clearly established that Data has multiple levels of consciousness with these vivid dreams, but does he have a routinely operating subconscious or unconscious mind in any way similar to humans? Would Dr. Soong have programmed such a thing to make him more like us, or to run background programs, or some other purpose? Clearly Data doesn't even know the answers to these questions. Was he aware of Anna there, was he aware of the force fields, and if he tried to cross them in his own dream could he do so?

Since Data had said he intended to suspend his dream program pending implementation of further safety subroutines, Picard knew there'd be no point in querying Data about any of it. Further, he had no valid reason to ask such invasive questions and would risk seeming unduly interested in Anna if he tried to find a roundabout way to ask.

Picard sighed and decided he'd rather deal with Admiral Nakamura than continue thinking about this most uncomfortable topic. He sat up, turned on his terminal, adjusted his uniform, and put on his best deferential smile as he set the call in motion to

update the Admiral and confess that he would not be attending the banquet.



Stardate 47226.8 (Tuesday 24/03/2370, 19:00) — Data's Quarters

By evening, Geordi had confirmed there was nothing residually wrong with Data, the Captain had lifted all security restrictions upon him, and Worf had very eagerly returned Spot to Data's quarters.

Data sat on his couch entertaining Spot with a pink, sparkly pom-pom on the end of a wire. He was never certain if Spot felt real emotions or what their nature might be, but he chose to interpret her boisterous play as happiness at being home.

His door chimed, so he looked up at it and said, "Enter."

Counselor Troi came in carrying a large, covered food tray.

Data hurriedly tossed the cat toy to the floor, prompting Spot to chase it down. "Counselor," he said, surprised to see her. "I did not have a chance to apologise for my actions.

"Data, don't worry about it. Geordi explained everything to me. It wasn't your fault," she said kindly as she beside him on the couch. "But somehow I thought turnabout would be fair play, so I made us a little something to snack on."

Troi set the tray on the table and lifted the cover, revealing a haphazardly decorated cake that nonetheless was clearly representative of Data. With a smile, she handed him a proper knife that was much more suitable for cutting cake than a coil brace.

Data took it and was about to cut the cake when his brow furrowed and he sat back instead. "I wonder," he mused, "what would Doctor Freud say about the symbolism of devouring oneself?"

Troi cheekily replied, "Data, sometimes a cake is just a cake."

Data nodded and began to serve them each a slice.



Stardate 47228.2 (Wednesday 25/03/2370, 07:00) — Bridge

“Status report,” Picard ordered as he arrived on the bridge.

“We arrived back at Starbase 84 ten minutes ago,” Riker reported, rising from the Captain’s chair and moving to his own. “They’re aware of us and have advised we’re in a queue for a bay.”

“Not a construction frame?” Picard asked as he sat down.

“No sir,” Data replied from the ops console. “The frames have full schedules for the next eight days, possibly longer now with the delay in the facility-wide decontamination of the interphasic creatures. It has been decided that the most efficient manner of replacement and repairs will occur in a standard bay as our team has already performed the majority of the work on board.”

“Very good,” Picard said. “And you’re feeling better, Mr. Data?”

“I am functioning within normal parameters, sir,” Data replied dutifully.

Picard looked to Troi, who nodded with a smile. “We’re all just fine now, Captain.”

“Excellent.”

“The Starfleet Surgeon General and Starfleet Command have issued joint advisories about scanning all equipment generated at interphasic manufacturing facilities,” Riker informed him.

“Oh? Good. That was fast.”

“I think you must’ve been very much missed at that banquet, sir,” Riker said with his usual irreverent grin.

“Hm,” Picard grumbled quietly.

Riker continued, “Every part coming out of these facilities is now subject to additional screening, and interphasic scans will now be included in regular ship maintenance cycles.”

“Has engineering been informed?” Picard asked.

“The notification has been sent to engineering as well, sir,” Data said, “but with your leave I will go to there in person and ensure the new scans are added to the roster, as well as tending to other...personnel issues.”

“Of course, Mr. Data.”

Data nodded and left.

Picard turned to Troi and asked, “Personnel issues?”

“I suspect that it’s both personal and regarding personnel,” she replied quietly. “I think everything that’s happened might have been particularly difficult on a certain warp drive specialist.”

“I see,” Picard said flatly. “Right then, do we have an approximate departure time?”

“They said hopefully by 1400,” Riker said. “I’ve already put out an announcement to the crew that only essential personnel should be going over to the starbase this time. No shore leave because we might leave at short notice to make up time to our next assignment, so anyone who goes over casually risks being left here.”

“Very good, Number One. We’re heading back towards Starbase 219 at that point? For the Cairn delegation?”

“That’s right,” Riker replied, leaning forward to pointedly look across at Troi.

Troi sighed. “Yes. And my mother.”

“Ah,” Picard said as he instinctively shrank back into his chair.



Stardate 47228.2 (Wednesday 25/03/2370, 07:15) — Anna’s Lab

Data stood outside Anna’s lab, having already determined her location there. He performed a series of calculations regarding best and worst scenarios to determine optimal things to say to achieve his desired goals of reassuring her that he was no danger to her and

convincing her to stay on board, as the majority of his projections indicated a high likelihood of her leaving despite having declared otherwise before his malfunction.

Within those sets of probabilities lurked several that indicated he should not to speak to her due to the possibility that doing so would scare her away. However, his ethical programming directed him towards conciliatory conversation, so he stepped forward and rang the chime.

The door opened and Data began to enter the room, noting immediately that it was immaculately clean in stark juxtaposition to Anna's usual cluttered and chaotic workspace. His scenario calculations of her intent to leave all escalated by significant margins. When he observed her sitting at the table with an unhappy posture and expression — her eyes displaying evidence of recent crying — he determined a minimum eighty-two percent likelihood that she intended to disembark at this starbase and not return.

Data did not like that estimate at all and experienced a powerful need to reduce it. He also experienced a moment of discord; as much as he did not wish for her to leave, he recognised the repeated turmoil of life aboard the flagship was clearly unpleasant for her. He could not decide whether it was in Anna's best interests to stay or go, given that as far as he was aware she had nowhere specific to go to nor other friends to rely upon.

He decided his profound compulsion to keep her close to facilitate his protection of her was a valid determining factor in choosing his next words. He also acknowledged to himself that it wasn't the most logical position, but logic seemed less important to him than his need to keep her safely nearby.

All of these considerations took place within the time of his first step into the room, so on the second step he said, "I have come to see if you are well, and to apologise if my behaviour and malfunctions have upset you."

She looked at him with clear and abundant sadness, but not with fear. "I don't know how I am. I'm...confused and...I don't

know.” She looked away. “Everything’s...I don’t know.” She sniffled and sighed.

The sight of her suffering bothered him immensely. Data did not like to see anybody suffer, but her pain was worse in ways he was incapable of defining. “I can assure you that I am no longer a threat, and I am very sorry for when I was.”

Anna nodded and looked at him again. “I know that part. I heard. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Not directly, yet it is still reasonable for people to be wary around me, given what occurred. It is important to me that you are not only kept safe but that you feel safe, and I entirely understand if you no longer feel safe around me even though I would not intentionally harm you.”

Anna nodded again, and then tilted her head towards one of the other chairs at the table, so he sat down beside her. He placed his hands upon the table as he had in the observation lounge under the Captain’s scrutiny for exactly the same reason: to demonstrate contrite deference.

Data continued, “I promise to do everything within my capabilities to keep you safe while you are aboard the Enterprise. I cannot guarantee that I will never again experience a malfunction or that other factors beyond my control will affect outcomes, but I do promise I will always prioritise your safety and do what I can to ensure it.”

“That’s very kind of you,” she said softly, then smiled with the slightest chuckle at her oft-repeated words. “The thing is...you are kind. I’m pretty sure you are kind to your core. Everything inside of me wants to trust you, but trust is a risk, isn’t it?”

“In some cases, yes, it can be,” he admitted.

“Maybe trust is knowing something bad is possible but setting that aside because you want so much to have that person around anyway?”

“Hm,” he replied. “That is an intriguing perspective. I am inclined to agree with it.”

Anna nodded to herself as if she was reaching a conclusion. “I think I’m learning that trust is when you decide someone is worth the risk.”

“That may be true, however, it would still be reasonable for you to no longer trust me, or to require that I regain your trust. I am incapable of offense and highly motivated to assure you, so if you have concerns about me you should feel free to speak them openly. I certainly had no intention to harm Counselor Troi, but nonetheless I did. Given how often you have been harmed, fearing me now would be a reasonable response.”

Her brow furrowed at him. “Are you telling me I should fear you for my own sake?”

“No. But if you did, I would understand.”

Her expression softened again. “I don’t want to fear you. If everything’s been fixed then I shouldn’t have to.”

“The malfunction appears to have been resolved but as I said, I cannot guarantee I will never malfunction again. I would never wish to harm you, but I am not infallible.”

With a mildly exasperated scoffing sound, she asked, “Is anyone?”

“No,” he replied.

Anna looked away again, her mouth twisted to one side, her arms over her chest, and her brow furrowed in thought. After a time, she sighed resolutely and looked at him again, this time nervously. She asked, “May I please touch your hands for something?”

“Of course. I am eager to help you in any way that I can.”

She tentatively reached over to his left hand, which was nearest to her, and gently turned it over so it was palm-up. She then placed her right hand in his left as she used her left to lift his right and enclose her right hand between his. She continued to stare at their joined hands as she asked, “You’re very strong, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

He could feel her pulse beginning to race as she asked, “Have you hurt many people?”

“‘Many’ is an insufficiently specific. I do not know an accurate count, because I have been involved in many ship to ship battles where —”

“I mean personally, face to face.”

“Again, there are multiple parameters that would need to be defined for an accurate count as it is possible I have hurt people unintentionally. However, I believe you are asking if I have hurt many people relative to other Starfleet officers given that we tend to end up in many conflict scenarios. In that light, I believe I have not hurt as many as other officers have, in part because I am more often involved with technical solutions to problems. Generally speaking, if I have hurt someone it was required to defend myself or others. I have several layers of ethical programs and safety protocols to ensure that I do not harm without cause.”

Anna patiently listened to all of this while still staring at their hands. “And you thought you were saving...her.”

“Yes. But I was mistaken. Hence my apologies to everyone involved directly and indirectly.”

She gave a little shake of her head as if to disregard the apology. “So these super strong hands could be doing a lot of harm but instead they go around saving people most of the time.”

“For the most part, yes.”

Suddenly she looked him in the eye and asked in a cold and direct tone, “You could crush my hand completely right now. Smash it into goo between yours.”

“Yes, but I would not do that,” he replied with similar directness but an attempt at gentle warmth intended to reassure her.

“What if someone’s life depended on it?” she demanded.

The only likely scenario he could imagine where he would crush someone’s hand out of necessity would be if they were falling and he had to grip extremely tightly to lift them, but even then he was certain he could do so with minimal damage that would be easily repaired in sickbay. But Data could tell Anna wasn’t interested in the hypothetical reasons so much as testing his parameters, so he replied, “I would have to override several moral

and ethical limitations, all of which I have just bolstered with increased programming because of my inadvertent injuring of Counselor Troi.”

“But it is a risk,” Anna said flatly.

“A very improbable one.”

“But so was you stabbing someone with a brace coil.”

“That is true,” he conceded.

Anna nodded again and returned her gaze to their hands. She took another deep breath and he could both feel and see her begin to tremble all over — including her lower lip — which Data recognised as a sign that a human was likely to begin crying. While he understood her questions, he was confused about their hands. He could, however, tell whatever she was doing was of deep importance to her, so he sat as still as he could to allow her to perform her strange tests.

Anna put her left hand over his right to hold it in place, and then slowly withdrew her right hand from between his. She began to take small, terrified gasps Data as she slid her left hand between his where her right had been. Her pulse was racing and tears began to spill out of her eyes.

She looked at him directly again and whispered in a quavering voice, “I don’t let anybody touch my left hand anymore. But I can do this, put my left hand between your super-strong, potentially dangerous hands, and I’m still safe.”

“Yes, you are,” he said as definitively as he could while taking care to keep his hands rigidly around hers without squeezing at all, as if he was holding a tiny, fragile, newly-hatched bird.

“I know that,” she declared back. “I don’t know how I know it, but I know it like I know how to breathe. You won’t hurt me.”

“Never intentionally, no.”

A sharp little laugh burst out of her as her tears increased. “See? You’re even protecting me from random possibilities outside of your control.”

“It would be unethical to make promises I am unable to keep. However, I am able to promise you that I would rather be

deactivated than ever be in a situation where I would be a danger to you.”

Anna nodded and sniffled. “I almost died when I was first freed on Earth because I thought it was impossible to trust anybody. But both there and now here on this ship nice people keep telling me I have to learn to trust.” She began to cry more openly and the pace of her breaths and words quickened. “I think they’re right, but it’s really hard, except that with you...it feels like it should be easy, or it did feel that way and then it didn’t but it wasn’t your fault and I feel like a bad person for not trusting but a stupid person if I do trust when I shouldn’t and it all feels like the weight of everything crushing down on me except I know deep inside me that if the whole universe clenched around me you’d probably be the one to try to stop it, to put your arms out and keep me from being smashed up.”

She took in a ragged breath and tried to regain control, but it was clearly very difficult for her.

Data said, “I am uncertain how I could hold back a collapsing universe, but if I could, I most certainly would, especially to save you from it.”

She smiled a little through her tears and nodded. “I believe you. I believe in you. And I choose you as the person to really, truly trust first. You are my first friend. I need this,” she said, putting her right hand over his and gently pushing down so he was more closely holding her left, making full contact along the entirety of her still-shaking hand between his own. “I need you,” she whispered, gazing at him desperately, her eyes enormous and still filled with tears.

They stared at each other for a moment before he replied, “Your trust is a significant honour, and I promise to do all that I can to live up to it.”

In the next moment Data came to understand why humanoids place so much aesthetic and metaphorical significance upon otherwise mundane occurrences such as the rising of a sun or the opening of a flower in the morning, because the way her entire face

changed as her anguish and fear gave way to joyful appreciation of him was reminiscent of the many poetic words he had encountered describing those other things. It seemed to him that the spread of his favourite smile across her cheeks must surely be more important than any sunrise, the return of a happy sparkle to her eyes more vital than any mere flower blooming. He surmised that if those things were the height of human artistic delight, then surely the way she smiled at him must be the height of his own aesthetic experiences.

Thus he was compelled to smile back at her, entirely satisfied that the conversation had turned out better than any of his projections and relieved that his new projections calculated that she would likely remain on the Enterprise.



Stardate 47228.3 (Wednesday 25/03/2370, 08:05) — Anna's Quarters

Anna entered her quarters with a tired but less burdened sigh. She stood in the centre of the room for a moment and looked around. She wasn't quite sure what would happen next or what her role would be once the new drive was fully operational, but Data's visit had changed her course so she needed to figure out what was next.

She thought about what Data had said about her honouring him by trusting him, and recalled that Worf had said something similar after the Tarkanian incursion into engineering. That prompted another recollection, so Anna went to her couch, opened the terminal on the table, and brought up her message list. She found the one from Worf all about his self-defence classes, read through the options, selected the one that sounded the least frightening because it catered to women of Lieutenant and lower rank only,

and replied to the message to ask if she could come along to that one, simply to observe at first.

Anna tried to tell herself that she was taking up Worf's offer to teach her self-defence to increase her confidence, but despite Data's kindness she could not help thinking, *Maybe I need to be better prepared in case anyone else ever has any more...malfunctions.* She shuddered, sent the reply, and closed the terminal.

Then she nodded to herself, glad she'd taken some responsibility to accept Worf's offer. *It's not enough to have nice people around, she realised. I have to let them be nice to me. I don't think it works if I have shields up all the time. I need to figure out how to use better sensor data to let the good through and keep the bad out.* She puffed out a breath firmly. *Gosh, that sounds hard. But if I don't try to do it myself, I don't think anybody else can help me with anything.*

A small noise came from the terminal, so with a furrowed brow of concern she opened it again to see a reply from Worf already, saying she was more than welcome to attend the class and participate as much or little as she wished, listing the gymnasium number for the next several sessions, an offering to escort her from her quarters to the gymnasium if she felt unsafe moving through the ship on her own.

Anna put her hands over her heart and smiled. *Maybe I can belong here after all, as long as I'm careful and smart about it.*

She resolutely stood and looked at her packed bag sitting on the chair across the room. The sight of it nearly prompted another bout of tears, but she steeled herself against them as she began to unpack. As she moved throughout the quarters putting her limited belongings back into the drawers and shelves, she softly sang, *"People reach new understandings all the time; they take a second look, maybe change their minds."*

She laughed a little as she closed a drawer, thinking about how warm Data's hands had been. A tear rolled down her cheek. As she caught it on her fingertip and looked at it, she sang brightly and

loudly, *“Did the morning come too early? Was the night not long enough? Does a tear of hesitation fall on everything you touch? Well, it might just be a lesson for the hasty heart to know: maybe leavin’s not the only way to go.”*

Anna sat on the end of the bed and picked at the soft, fuzzy blanket on her right side, her tone once again soft, a mix of hope and melancholy at all that had occurred. *“And a heart without a home is such a lonesome row to hoe. Maybe leavin’s not the only way to go.”*

While her last note still hung in the air she thought, *And if it goes badly, I’ll just hide somewhere until I can get off at the next stop.*



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 a 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 children drew the pictures of her on this page.