

# *SPACEDAD STORIES*

## FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Book Four

A Work of Fan Fiction

By Kimberly Chapman



*SpaceDad Book Four*

# **FRIENDS AND FAMILY**

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This is a work of fan fiction written for mental health escapism during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and other world problems. 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 storylines are entirely fictitious.

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*“When children learn to devalue others, they can devalue anyone, including their parents.”*

*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 42527.4 (Monday 12/07/2365 11:55) — Covaris Two —  
Wreckage of SS Baltimore NAR-22601

Twenty-year-old Anna White gradually woke, comfortably suspended in a blue aerial silk cocoon partway down the starboard corridor that ran between the former crew's quarters and the outer hull with windows overlooking the starboard nacelle. Technically it wasn't much of a corridor anymore so much as a shaft, since the Baltimore had crashed into Covaris Two nose-down and remained upended in that position, albeit with a slight angle.

Early on in her years living aboard the wreckage, Anna had hung ropes through all of the corridor-shafts so she could easily climb her way all through the ship. Eventually she'd learned about aerial silks and while she had little aptitude for the gymnastics for which they were intended — especially since she'd lost the lower half of her right leg in the crash — she'd discovered that it was much more pleasant to climb up and slide down the silks than rough rope. Further, she'd learned to wrap herself up in them and sleep wherever suited her as she worked to repair the ship.

As she woke in this instance, she was pleased to discover her left foot was poking out of the fabric into the warm, sunny beam from the window. Despite how hot the desert L-Class planet was outside, ever since she'd patched the gaping holes in the hull her remaining foot always got cold when she slept regardless of how many socks she put on it. Sunshine, however, made it toasty warm.

Anna opened one eye to peek out from the silk wrap at her sun-glowing toes, wiggled them appreciatively, and then closed her eyes again to stretch and yawn, taking care not to look directly at the crew quarters behind her. The rest of the crew had died on the bridge on impact, leaving Anna all alone when she was only five years old. She did her utmost at all times to avoid thinking about

any of them, especially her mother or the perpetually angry Captain Dager. His quarters were within touching distance, so she instinctively stretched away from that wall and kept thoughts of related horrors at bay.

As the stretch subsided, she wriggled her whole body into the silk more firmly, contemplating if she should attempt to sleep more or answer nature's call in the nearby facilities that she'd reconfigured to be upright relative to the ship's unanticipated position. It was hard to tell how long she'd slept since the sun's position coming through the windows never changed on this gravitationally-locked planet, and she wasn't very good at guessing.

She sighed softly and then asked, "Computer, how long was I asleep?"

*"Approximately three hours and forty two minutes,"* the Baltimore's computer replied.

That surprised her, since anything over two hours without a nightmare was uncommon for her. She stretched again, yawned, and sat up. "Well, then, back to work," she muttered.

*"Current daily and weekly sleep totals are in deficit relative to optimal sleep patterns for humans."*

"Well if you love sleep so much, you do it."

*"Unable to comply; define program parameters."*

Anna laughed. "I should program you a sleep schedule and make you eat broccoli too."

*"Unable to comply; invalid input parameters."*

"Yeah, it's an invalid input for me too but you keep nagging me to eat it."

The Baltimore made a noise that Anna always thought of as a petulant chirp.

Anna snorted another laugh and began to unwrap her cocoon, but paused as curiosity struck. "Do any computers ever sleep and dream?"

*"Information not on file."*

“I thought I saw something once about a book with dreaming computers and counting electric sheep?”

“Accessing...*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Phillip K Dick, 1968. Novel is available for audio playback.”

“What’s it about?”

“Archival record states: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* is a twentieth-century post-apocalyptic novel in which bounty hunter Rick Deckard must wrestle his internal moral crises while on assignment to destroy a group of androids who are on the verge of achieving true sentience and are thereby nearly indistinguishable from humans.”

Anna wrinkled her nose. “Ugh, no, that sounds depressing. Are sentient androids even real? I’ve heard of vaguely human-like ones being found here and there but basically they were fancy robots.”

“Accessing...*Ensign Data*, last known assignment *USS Trieste*, is the only known sentient android.”

“Oh wow, a Starfleet one? Wait, why only one?”

“Information not on file.”

“Huh. Maybe it’s for the best there aren’t a bunch of sentient computer people wandering around. You’re pretty naggy, and I’m not sure I’d like it if you actually had the physical body power to make me follow your rules.”

“This unit adheres to the *Starfleet Childhood Education Module* as initiated on stardate 27222.9 by Lieutenant Meredith White.”

“Stardate 27222.9 by Lieutenant Meredith White,” Anna recited along in unison, rolling her eyes at the computer’s standard response whenever she argued about its rules. “Yeah yeah, don’t sing me that song again. I’ve heard it before and it’s boring. Anyway, I’ve got to get back to work,” she said as she resumed unwrapping her cocoon.

“Estimated current nutritional input does not conform to —”

Anna cut the computer off. “I’m not hungry. I’ll eat later. I need to get these trellium C/D panels up if I’m ever going to get off this

rock and get to have a conversation with a living person ever again. No offense.”

The computer was silent.

Anna tilted her head to the side and raised an eyebrow, staring out the window into the endless desert beyond. “You mustn’t pout,” she chided. She put on her best Auntie Em voice to say, “You’ll worry yourself into anaemia!” Then she giggled again and offered, “How about I sing you your favourite song on my way down to the toilet?”

*“Query not recognised.”*

“Liar, I already gave you an update to recognise the song.”

The computer made several beeps and chirps, but then repeated, *“Query not recognised.”*

Anna sighed, shook her head, grinned, and then began belting out, “*Good morning Baltimore!*” as she slid down the silk. “*Every day’s like an open door!*” she sang as she swung herself through the door into the washroom. “*Every night is a fantasy! All your beeps are a symphony,*” she sang with a giggle as she sat on the toilet. “*Good morning Baltimore! And some day when I fix all your floors, the world’s gonna wake up and see, my Baltimore and me!*”

The computer made a single chirping sound in response.

Anna laughed and added with an operatic flourish, “*And now I pee!*” Her last note held for several seconds before giggles overtook her and cut off her silly song.

Completely unbeknownst to Anna or the Baltimore’s computer — which had not received any file updates since the crash — the android ensign assigned to the Trieste had since ranked up to lieutenant commander, transferred to the flagship Enterprise, and was in that precise moment about to face a court case determining his rights as a person, argued for by the father Anna had never met and had long since forsworn.

# CHAPTER ONE

Stardate 47237.1 (Saturday 28/03/2370 13:00) — USS Enterprise  
1701-D — Deck Thirty-One — Room 5334, Anna White's  
Quarters

Since the ship had left Starbase 84 for Starbase 219 a few days before with the new drive finally up and working — and interphasic-worm free — Anna had made a point of popping in and out of engineering enough to break her previous cycle of hiding away in her quarters or her lab next door every time something stressful had occurred. The stress had indeed been quite high as the drive she'd been brought aboard to consult upon had initially failed because of said interphasic worms, and because the creatures had somehow caused Data to malfunction and stab Counselor Troi.

Not that Anna held much concern for Troi personally, since she feared the Betazoid mind-reading ability and assumed if she ever so much as approached the Counselor her closely held secret about her biological father would be exposed; assuming he hadn't already told others himself, which Anna had begun to suspect was not the case since nobody had said anything about it in the five weeks she'd been aboard.

Nonetheless, the notion that her new friend Data could harm anybody had frightened her terribly and caused her to nearly leave the Enterprise at Starbase 84, never to return.

However, Data's kind and earnest explanations of what had gone wrong and how determined he was to keep his fellow crewmates safe in the future had convinced Anna to stay; especially his promises to dedicate himself to her safety in particular. She'd decided to take a leap of faith, believe in him and his friendship, and thus remain on board in whatever participatory manner she could carve out for herself. She was even scheduled to

sit in on one of Worf's self-defence classes later that evening as she considered him to be very kind and protective of her as well.

The trouble was every time she'd gone down to engineering over the past two days Geordi had tried to wheedle her into some kind of celebration of "success" regarding the new drive. He too had been quite kind and earnest in his attempts to come up with a method of celebration that wouldn't overwhelm her, but he failed to realise the entire concept overwhelmed her in large part because she didn't see the new drive as her success at all. She remained deeply embarrassed by the failures despite knowing they had nothing to do with her calculations or other contributions whatsoever.

Further, it didn't help that each time she went to engineering either Dean Covett or Reg Barclay was there, or both. The former sneered continuously lately, clearly waiting for a moment of weakness to strike with another mean comment. The latter had made her increasingly uncomfortable in ways she couldn't clearly define, and that resulted in a confusing cloud of guilt hanging overhead in combination with the confusion and guilt regarding the drive.

It all made her stomach clench, which made it difficult to eat, which made her feel generally ill all over and want to stay in bed, longing for the suspended cocoons she'd had on the Baltimore.

When she'd woken just before noon, she briefly wondered if she was actually ill or possibly suffering long-term effects from the creepy interphasic worms, but used her self-made medical tricorder to scan herself and determined simply that she had low blood sugar and was somewhat dehydrated; typical results from not eating. She almost missed being nagged to eat. Almost.

She turned over in the bed to check the time on the bodged medical tricorder on the bedside table. It was 13:02. Her creation was no sleek Starfleet beauty, but it did the job because she'd quietly hacked herself access to a secured connection to Starfleet's diagnostic database. While she was certain all of that was against the rules, nobody had specifically told her it was. She figured the

only one who could be harmed by her self-diagnostics was herself, meaning it was a crime with no external victims.

*Besides, she thought, any decent medical team should be happy that I took care of myself so well since there's a zero per cent chance of me ever showing up in sickbay.*

Anna shuddered and quickly closed her eyes against all of the sensory memories of the sickbay on the Baltimore where she'd lost her leg in the crash, the sickbay on the USS Carbonaria where her abductor Robert Loxos had brutally tortured and assaulted her for weeks, and The Institute where she'd been forcibly confined when returned to Earth due to the mistaken belief that she was "feral" because she was unable to speak after being rescued from the trauma of the Carbonaria.

In particular, the sickbay on the Carbonaria was the same modular build as that on the Galaxy class ships, so she knew the one on the Enterprise would look, smell, feel, and sound exactly the same.

Anna sat up quickly as she felt bile rise in her throat, forcing it back down with gravity and gulping. She groaned, took a deep breath, and imagined herself in her mental happy place, singing the matching song in her mind, *"Buzz buzz buzz, chirp chirp chirp, and a couple of lah-dee-dahs, that's how the crickets crick all day in the merry old land of Oz."*

After a moment of relaxing, she opened her eyes again and swung her knees over the edge of the bed, singing the next line aloud. *"We get up at twelve and start to work at one, take an hour for lunch and then at two we're done! Jolly good fun!"* She laughed slightly and muttered, "Well it's just after one now. I suppose even if Dean or Reg or whatever else is down there, I really ought to give it one more try."

That put a different song in her head, one from & Juliet. As she hoisted herself through her little quarters on the ropes she'd hung from the ceiling she sang, *"Have you ever felt out of place? Like something knocked you off, off your wave? You try to lift your head up to show 'em what you're made of."*

She thought, *I don't even know what I'm made of anymore*, but then continued to sing as she changed out of her beloved blue-butterfly pajamas into her usual engineering-gold jumpsuit. *"I used to always feel too afraid to take that extra step, make a change. But now I gotta stand up,"* she sang as she reached for her prosthetic leg. *"And show 'em what I'm made of."*

She stood and turned to the windows, which she'd covered with pale yellow and blue gingham curtains stamped all over with tiny butterflies and rainbows. With a hop up onto the couch, she pulled a curtain aside to peer out at the streaming streaks of stars in the distance. *"Ooo, we all were born to break the rules. I know I got a lot of hill to climb but on this starry night I'm feeling new. Oh, oh, anything goes."*

Anna let go of the curtain and carefully stepped back off the couch, turning towards her door, singing more loudly, *"This is the moment I've waited for. Won't hold it back, no, not anymore. I'm starting over with tears in my eyes. All that I'm asking is one more try."*

She brushed away her actual tears, took a deep breath, held her head high, and strode out the door.

In the corridor, she considered boldly taking the turbolift, but the ever-lingering threat of accidentally encountering Picard loomed. Anna decided it was dangerous enough that she was going to have to go up to the saucer section for Worf's class later, so there was no point upsetting herself with unnecessary worry at the moment.

In a concentrated effort to maintain her bravado, she sang in her mind, *Sick of being told who I am. Been put into a box, no, not again. It's time for me to step out and show 'em what I'm all about. 'Cause ooo, we all were born to break the rules. I know I've got a Jefferies tube to climb.* She stepped into the large vertical shaft that led directly to engineering. *But on this starry night I'm feeling new. Oh, oh anything goes.*

She took ahold of the railings and began to slide down the decks at a speed that would have greatly upset Geordi if he'd seen

her. *This is the moment I've waited for! Won't hold it back, no, not anymore! I'm starting over with tears in my eyes. All that I'm asking is one more try.*

She landed, closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and continued to sing silently to herself, *I've made mistakes and I've let you down; been young and stupid, I see it now. I'm starting over with tears in my eyes. All that I'm asking is one more try.*

With that, she opened her eyes with renewed determination to make herself belong in the space ahead of her.



Stardate 47237.1 (Saturday 28/03/2370 13:15) — Bridge

“We’re about two days out from Starbase 219,” Riker reported. “Our current schedule is to remain docked there until the Cairn delegation comes aboard with Ambassador Troi five days after that, and then head off to the Federation Council meeting on Deep Space Four another four days beyond that.”

Both Picard and Troi pointedly ignored Riker’s formalised mention of Deanna’s mother and his subsequent cheeky grin, but Riker found their pretence amusing nonetheless. He continued, “Assuming we have no further detours or delays, we’re then scheduled to meet with the Kes government on Kesprytt on stardate 47305.5.”

“Well we’d better not have any more detours or delays involving Deep Space Four, Number One,” Picard replied. “Commander Rosen will accuse me of making her life ‘too interesting’ again.”

“Don’t worry, Captain,” Troi said. “My mother has been working with the Cairn for a long time now to hopefully ensure everything goes smoothly with their introduction to the Council. Last I heard from her, she seemed quite excited by the entire project.”

“Very good, Counselor. We could use some nice, quiet diplomatic successes for a change.”

“Maybe Rosen will have an update for you about the Tarkanians,” Riker suggested.

“That would be splendid. I am reasonably hopeful that we’ve helped their society to —”

“Pardon the interruption, Captain,” came Worf’s voice from behind and above Picard’s chair. “You have an incoming transmission from Vulcan Minister T’Char.”

“T’Char? Well now that is good news,” Picard said with sudden excitement. He stood, adjusted his uniform, and smiled broadly at Worf. “A pleasant diversion indeed. I’ll speak to him in my ready room, Mr. Worf,” he said as he headed off in that direction.

Worf nodded and transferred the communication, but then his expression became somewhat confused. “Him? I thought only Vulcan women’s names began with that T’ syllable.”

Troi turned in her chair to face Worf. “That’s usually the case. Minister T’Char is a man, but a rather unique one, especially amongst Vulcans,” she explained in a carefully diplomatic tone, albeit with a growing smile of her own. “He originally had a different name but then took on his grandmother’s name, challenging Vulcan society to be...less rigid in their gender roles.”

Riker grinned and chuckled. “I’ve seen the video of his speech. It’s a beautiful moment when he declares it both illogical and in defiance of Vulcan IDIC philosophy to adhere to binary gender norms.”

Troi nodded. “He’s quite flamboyant compared to usual Vulcan styling. Not to mention his hair.”

Worf asked, “What is wrong with his hair?”

“Absolutely nothing, and that’s the point,” Troi emphasised. “It’s not the standard Vulcan style. It’s more...”

“Captain Pike, circa what, 2259, 2260?” Riker suggested.

Troi laughed. “I’ll take your word for that. You’re the enthralled Pike fan.”

Riker feigned offense for a moment, but then grinned again. “I’m not enthralled! I have a legitimate and healthy career interest in all captains of ships called Enterprise.”

Troi laughed genially along with him.



Stardate 47237.1 (Saturday 28/03/2370 13:18) — Main Engineering

Anna poked her head out of the Jefferies tube door cautiously to inspect who was around, but she couldn’t see anyone at all. She carefully proceeded through the front room along the central console until she spied movement in the drive bay area.

There she found Ensigns Andrea Tyler and Kevin Wong looking at a PADD together. They noticed her approach. Andrea smiled broadly and waved enthusiastically, while Kevin merely nodded politely in her direction.

“Where is everyone?” Anna asked.

“Briefing,” Andrea replied. “But there’s some security stuff in it so it’s lieutenant and up only.”

“There are perks to being an ensign,” Kevin said with a chuckle.

“You don’t want to know what’s happening?” Anna asked.

“Oh I do,” Kevin replied. “But not if it means sitting through one of those meetings. We’ll find out whatever we need to know soon enough.”

“Yeah they’ll come back with lists of work we need to do,” Andrea added. “How are you doing?”

“Um, okay,” Anna said with a nod and a smile she hoped would communicate confidence and thus actually give her some. “Am I allowed to be in here with the others out?”

The ensigns both shrugged. Andrea replied, “Don’t see why not.” Then she jerked a thumb back towards the warp drive behind

her. “That’s partly your baby, after all. And anyway it’s not actually just us. Dern and Abakumov just went to get some parts out of the cargo bay, and Taurik’s around somewhere.”

As if on queue, the young Vulcan engineer came through the main entryway and went directly to the central console, where he began tapping away busily.

Andrea and Kevin shrugged again.

“Okay,” Anna said. “I guess I’ll just sit over here like usual, then.”

The others nodded and resumed their task as Anna sat at the console behind the chief engineer’s desk. From there she could easily see the warp drive through the window to the drive bay, and also use the window as a mirror to regularly check that nobody was coming up behind her unexpectedly.

The various ensigns moved around engineering as she worked but other than Andrea grinning happily at her with every pass, none of them paid her any heed. Anna found it quiet like night shift albeit with the lights on full, and she enjoyed having the space calm and mostly to herself.



Stardate 47237.1 (Saturday 28/03/2370 13:18) — Ready Room

As Picard headed into his ready room, it occurred to him that it was worth considering confiding in T’Char about the situation with Anna White. T’Char had been a close and trusted friend since they’d met while Picard was in Starfleet Academy, and he’d met Anna’s mother Meredith while she and Picard were dating.

T’Char had made it quite clear to Picard at the time that he didn’t approve of Meredith, even going so far as to say he got the sense that she was being quite manipulative. Picard had waved off that verdict back then, having assumed it was simply because of T’Char’s own affection for Picard — an unrequited one, for as

much as Picard adored T'Char as a friend he couldn't muster any romantic feelings in return, which T'Char had logically accepted as truthful and unlikely to change.

Upon reflection in the present, Picard wondered if T'Char had sensed something about Meredith's intention to try to become pregnant, or merely her machinations towards marriage in general. *Would that not make T'Char a valuable confidant regarding Anna?* Picard pondered. *Or would it all seem not very logical given that we have as yet no conclusive proof that Anna is my child at all, especially since she bloody well won't even let me speak to her to resolve any of it?*

With a small sigh, Picard decided it probably wasn't time to let T'Char in on the whole business yet. The notion had comforted him somewhat, though, and he was eager to talk to his friend about any topic at all.

He went to his desk and brought up the subspace call on his terminal. With a warm smile he said, "Hello old friend. How are you?"

"*I am well. And you?*" the handsome Vulcan asked in a manner that suggested he was used to performing this standard human greeting ritual. He sat casually in a plush, merlot-coloured armchair, one leg jauntily crossed over the other which revealed the inner, shimmering, multicoloured fabric lining of his robe. The outer side of the garment was much more sedate and quite nearly suitable as standard Vulcan diplomatic dress, although even there its swirls of red and grey would likely have appeared too busy on the average Vulcan — something T'Char was very much not.

As Riker had alluded, T'Char's hair was swept up atop his head in a dramatic wave towards his right. Behind his controlled expression there was a hint of playful sparkle that was unappreciated by his fellow Vulcans but always attracted a great deal of positive human attention.

"Well I'm not dead, so that's a good start to the month," Picard replied glibly.

*“Indeed. I was otherwise indisposed while you were on your piratical adventure some weeks ago, so I only heard the news of your alleged demise after I’d heard the news of your resurrection. Otherwise I would have sent official condolences to your crew,”* he said with a teasing smirk.

“It took me far too long to respond to every bit of correspondence congratulating me on having not been murdered as it was. I hope you were engaged in much more useful pursuits?”

*“That remains to be determined, and I require your assistance towards it,”* T’Char said, his tone becoming more serious.

*Oh dear,* Picard thought, sitting up a little straighter.

He knew full well that T’Char’s role as the Vulcan Minister for Peace was entirely concocted just so the Vulcan High Command could get his alleged “disruptive influence” off of the homeworld. The title had never existed before T’Char, and High Command had expected him to take the hint and go bother other worlds with his unerringly logical yet very thorny views on gender and relationships. It wasn’t as though Vulcan didn’t have homosexuality, nor was it illegal or punishable in any way, but T’Char’s insistence that all gender norms along with all traditional marriage rituals and restrictions were illogical and thus should be cast aside had caused too much trouble in too many circles.

As a renowned master of scholarly works, nobody had been able to defeat T’Char’s incessant points of debate on such topics. Thus, those who found his cavalier views threatening had instead sent him out to the galaxy, ostensibly with a mandate to research and improve upon the notion of peace between various peoples.

They hadn’t expected him to actually do it, let alone be successful at it. They certainly hadn’t expected him to use his curious blend of Vulcan stoicism and natural charm to poke his way into untold diplomatic circles and find unique solutions to everything from agricultural disasters in burgeoning colonies to having stopped at least three interplanetary wars on the edges of Federation space. With every world that happily joined the Federation as a result of his unexpected triumphs, his influence

grew, further threatening those who'd cast him out in the first place.

T'Char was an effortless chameleon, switching between unshakeable, upright diplomat to a flirtatious peacock whenever either role or any in between suited him. Outside of Vulcan society, he always seemed to know what everyone else in the galaxy would respond best to, making everyone feel heard, respected, and — where necessary — amused along the way.

Picard had watched over the years as all of this had unfolded, delighted at his friend's wins for the sake of all involved. But for T'Char to take on a dire tone in asking for assistance meant something significant was afoot, which simultaneously excited and worried Picard.

"You know very well I'm eager to assist you in any way that I can," Picard replied.

T'Char nodded. *"I counted on that, Jean-Luc. However, I must warn you that all I have at this point is speculation. Facts are few and quite middling little things at that. But I have seen a possible pattern of things...a series of odd events that I increasingly believe are linked though I cannot precisely define why."*

"Ah yes," Picard said. "A gut feeling."

T'Char regarded him with narrowed eyes, then gave him the slightest of smiles. *"That's bait."*

Picard laughed, in part to ease his own tension. "Yet also an apt description from my point of view. You can't come to me with what sounds like an intuitive emotional response and expect me not to tease you for it a little bit."

T'Char raised an eyebrow and flatly said, *"Perhaps I wished for you to tease."*

"That's also bait," Picard replied with a grin.

*"It is."*

Picard chuckled, and then leaned forward on his desk, closer to the terminal. "T'Char, tell me what you've detected. I'll believe you that there's something there, at least enough to help you find out more."

The Vulcan's expression darkened once more. *"You are headed to Starbase 219, correct?"*

*"We are."*

*"I would appreciate it if you could keep your proverbial ear to the ground for any news, rumours, anything at all about unlicensed mining operations in the surrounding sectors."*

"Mining?" Picard asked. "That seems a bit dull for your usual level of intrigue."

*"That's precisely my concern,"* T'Char replied. *"It's all very dull. Entirely dull,"* he said with a droll sigh and exaggerated eye roll. Then he lifted a finger as if to literally point out, *"Dull to the point that it seems as if any potential enticement to anyone for anything has been very carefully removed."*

Picard's brows went up with interest.

T'Char continued, *"Illegal mining happens everywhere, all the time. We know this. No local government nor the Federation has the resources to hunt down every tiny operation. Starfleet will come sweep away anything large or overtly dangerous, of course, but small-scale theft of minerals from asteroids?"* T'Char shrugged widely with his heavily jewelled hands. *"It has never been Federation policy to waste time going after small outfits scraping in the dirt for infinitesimal income, not when they'll simply relocate or someone will replace them as soon as you've swept the previous ones away."*

"Indeed," Picard agreed. "But you think there's more going on with a particular small operation?"

*"More than one, and that's where the intuitive response comes in,"* T'Char said, borrowing Picard's phrasing but leaving out the word "emotional".

*"A network, perhaps?"*

T'Char shook his head. *"Not that organised, or else I could find out more. No, my concern is that a particular nefarious entity may be using these otherwise harmless little crews to mask something much more significant. As I said, I haven't found anything remotely*

*resembling facts or evidence yet, but I'm suspicious of how much magnesite mining is going on in your current area."*

"Magnesite?"

*"Yes, magnesite. And yes, dull as dirt. Practically dirt. So why have I found multiple linkages — albeit tenuous ones — back to the Tal Shiar?"*

"Good heavens."

T'Char nodded. *"It occurs to me that one could mine for magnesite at the same time as other things, and nobody would care about the magnesite."*

"What could the Tal Shiar want to mine, then?"

T'Char shook his head slowly and sat back in his chair, bringing his fingertips together before him. *"Hundreds of possibilities, none of which stick out as particularly likely in the absence of any other information. That is why I need you to take note of anything you hear in the area, no matter how innocuous. If I'm going to uphold this role as Minister of Peace, I can't abide anything that threatens the fragile peace of that area."*

"No, indeed. Have you informed the High Command of any of this?"

*"Of course not. It would all be seen as terribly illogical to chase after such a thin premise."*

"You've gone after less before and come out triumphant."

*"Yes, but I didn't tell the High Command in the early stages of any of those pursuits either."*

Picard chuckled again.

*"You find that amusing, Jean-Luc?"* T'Char asked, his expression and tone lightening back up.

"I do. Well, not the Tal Shiar part, of course. I'm always amused at your coups versus the High Command. All venerated political bodies need an occasional poke and I very much enjoy the ones you continue to give them."

*"And I always enjoy your amusement, my dear friend,"* T'Char replied.

Picard was reasonably certain that line was another bit of flirtatious bait, so he offered back, “It has been too long since we’ve visited in person.”

“*It has,*” T’Char replied. “*And yet, that is the way of things. Do please contact me if you learn anything?*”

“Of course,” Picard said.

“*Thank you,*” T’Char said and ended the call.

Picard smiled at the screen as it changed back to the Federation subspace communication logo. *He’s an unusual Vulcan,* Picard thought, *but still abrupt and to the point like any of them.* Then he added aloud, “When it suits his purposes,” and chuckled once more, his love for mysteries entirely piqued by the conversation.



Stardate 47237.2 (Saturday 28/03/2370 14:05) — Main Engineering

Anna was working at the central console when she heard a soft, little noise from the main entrance to engineering. She looked up and saw a small child peeking mischievously around the corner.

The child noticed Anna in return and narrowed her eyes briefly, as if evaluating her. Then she grinned, stepped in a bit further, and asked, “Is my Mom in here?”

Anna — who had had almost no interaction with real children throughout her entire life — immediately thought that she looked like the young version of Moana from the original animated film, but with bouncing, black ringlet pigtails tied with chunky, sparkly, purple ribbons. Just like young Moana, the girl had golden-brown skin, enormous brown eyes, a short, broad nose, and a perfectly curious smile. Unlike Moana, this little girl was wearing red overalls over a blue sweater.

Despite her urge to suddenly launch into songs from that beloved film, Anna tried desperately to think of what to say and only managed, “Um...hi?”

The child rolled her eyes a little, sighed, and tilted her head to one side as if annoyed by Anna’s cluelessness. “My Mom,” she repeated. “She works in here. I came to find her.”

“Um...is she a lieutenant or higher?”

The little girl crossed her arms defiantly. “Yes, of course she is.”

“Well they’re all still in a meeting,” Anna replied. She glanced at the time on the console before her. “Oh I see, it’s gone late. Was she supposed to get you from the classroom?”

The child nodded. “I’m supposed to wait for her there, but I didn’t want to, so I didn’t.”

Anna couldn’t help but grin at that. “Oh really? Escaped, did you?”

That notion appeared to please the little girl. She skipped happily over to Anna as she said, “Yep!” She stood on tiptoes to peer at the console. “What’re you doing?”

“I’m entering our latest bits of test data from the pulse compressions on the warp drive’s matter stream into the optimisation algorithm to make sure the new drive is performing as expected and seeing how we can tweak things to improve it even more.” Only after she’d speed-blurted this information did it occur to her that a small child would likely neither understand nor care. She quickly reviewed her own words to determine that none of it was likely to be scary or inappropriate, at least.

But the little girl nodded sagely at her and said, “That’s very interesting.”

Skeptically, Anna asked, “Did you understand any of that?”

The child wrinkled her nose, shrugged, and shook her head dismissively. “No, but whenever Mom or Daddy don’t understand each other, they nod and say it’s very interesting. Or whenever they want me to stop talking.”

Anna chuckled. “And do you stop talking?”

The girl scoffed, put her hands on her hips, and retorted, “Not unless I want to.”

Anna stuck out her hand in greeting. “Hi. I’m Anna White and I think I already like you.”

The child took her hand and shook it officiously, like a tiny diplomat. “I’m Aoife. It’s said like ‘ee-fa’ but it’s spelled A-O-I-F-E because it’s old Irish garlic. I’m nearly four and going on forty. How old are you?”

Anna was fairly certain Aoife had meant “Gaelic” and not “garlic”, but chose not to mention it. Instead she glibly answered, “I’m twenty-four going on twenty-forty.”

Aoife laughed. “That’s silly.”

“So you’re the infamous Aoife Navarro.”

“Infamous?” Aoife repeated back as if she wasn’t sure what it meant.

“It means I’ve heard about you.”

Aoife nodded sagely again as she said, “Ah, I see,” making Anna wonder where a little kid had learned such adult-like mannerisms. “I’ve heard about you too so that’s fair. Mom said you got crashed in a ship.”

A little chill ran through Anna, but she simply replied, “Yeah, I did.”

“She told Daddy you need a big dose of matter doll love,” Aoife said, and then tilted her head to the side again. “I want a matter doll.” Then she put her hands on her hips and demanded, “What’s a matter doll and where can I get one? I checked the replicator and it doesn’t have any listed.”

Anna awkwardly guessed, “I...think she probably said maternal?”

Aoife frowned as she considered that possibility. “Maybe. What does that mean?”

*How the hell would I know?* Anna thought, but instead carefully replied, “Um...it’s like when your Mom loves you. That’s maternal love.”

“Oh, that,” Aoife said, distinctly unimpressed. “I kind of still want a matter doll.”

“Well, I guess any doll made of matter is a matter doll.”

“What’s matter?” Aoife asked.

Anna could not help but reply, “Nothing, what’s a-matter with you?”

Aoife wrinkled her tiny nose again. “Huh?”

“It’s a joke.”

“Not a funny one.”

“Probably not,” Anna admitted, holding back laughter at how harshly she was being judged by this small creature. She decided a proper answer was in order, so she said, “Matter is basically all of this stuff all around you. Substances that are made up of particles and take up physical space and have inertia.” She knocked gently on the side of the console. “Like this console, or you, or a cat, or a puddle, or rocks floating out in space.”

With yet another adult-like nod, Aoife said, “Gotcha. Mom said you know a lot of science stuff. I guess she’s right about some things after all.”

At that point Ensign Mei Abakumov entered engineering while reading a PADD, looked up long enough to see Aoife there, and then rushed over, annoyed. “Aoife Navarro!” she barked in her thick Siberian accent. “What are you doing down here again? You know you are supposed to wait in the classroom!”

Aoife shot Abakumov a look of bored defiance.

Abakumov then said to both Anna and Aoife, “Main engineering is not a place for children!”

Anna shrugged awkwardly.

The ensign glared at Aoife, announced, “I am going to go get your mother!” and stormed back out of engineering.

Aoife rolled her eyes, clearly unconcerned.

Anna surmised, “I think that bit about children in engineering was directed at me.”

“Probably. Mei doesn’t like me so she probably doesn’t like you either. She doesn’t like anyone and she’s mean.”

Anna blinked. “I...didn’t even know Mei was her first name. I knew another Mei once who was very nice.”

Aoife turned her haughty expression back to Anna. “Names don’t mean anything about how someone is. I know everybody’s name down here, whether they want me to or not. Especially the mean ones.” But then she smiled up at Anna and added, “You’re not mean, though. I ‘prove of you. Show me what you’re doing.”

“Um, okay,” Anna replied, wondering if it was a good idea but also deciding it was better to keep the child in one place and near the exit if it was going to be such a problem that she was in engineering. *I spent my childhood around this stuff and I survived just fine*, she thought. She pointed to the LCARS display. “This is where I’m entering the data I told you about. It’s pretty similar to any entry field you use on your school PADD.”

“Does that mean I can type into it?” Aoife asked hopefully.

Anna knew that was almost certainly going too far, even though again she’d spent her childhood doing it constantly. “No, sorry, you can’t touch this yet.”

“How come?” Aoife asked.

“You’ve got to be at least five years old to touch an engineering panel.”

Aoife eyed her suspiciously again, hands back on hips. “How old were you when you first did?”

“Five. That’s how I know,” Anna said confidently.

Aoife crossed her arms. “I’m going to remember that, you know, and come down here when I turn five.”

Aisling came barrelling into engineering, shouting, “Aoife Navarro! What the...blazing heck are you doing down here?”

Anna instinctively cringed away from the loud grown-up ire, even though part of her mind was amused at the barely-contained swear words she was sure Aisling had wanted to say instead.

Aisling looked at her and more gently said, “I am so sorry about this,” as Abakumov came back in behind her, still irate.

“No, it’s fine,” Anna replied, eager to keep everyone calm and happy.

Aisling turned back to Aoife and growled, “It most certainly is not!” She took hold of Aoife’s hand and began marching her out, but at the door the little girl turned and waved with a huge grin as they left.

Anna waved back.

“Do not encourage her,” Abakumov said. “That one is an escape artist and she will just keep coming back if she thinks she is welcome.”

Anna shrugged and said, “I support non-standard skills in clever little girls.”

Abakumov muttered, “That one is too clever by half.”

“Yeah. I like her already,” Anna said.

Abakumov glared, turned, and went into the drive bay.

Anna watched her go and only then noticed that Andrea was watching from the drive bay. She scurried over to Anna to whisper, “That was entertaining!”

“Did you hear all of it?” Anna asked.

“Enough of it.”

“How come you didn’t go get Aisling?”

Andrea grinned mischievously. “I didn’t think there was any harm in letting Aoife meet you. And anyway, I knew someone else would get Aisling. I didn’t want to be the one to interrupt the staff meeting and risk making Commander La Forge angry with me,” she said, saying his name dreamily as she always did. But then she sighed and added, “Besides, I think it’s hilarious that the child of a security officer can bypass security so often, don’t you?”

“That is kind of funny, actually, as long as Aisling isn’t going to be too angry,” Anna said, twisting her fingers together a little.

Andrea shook her head and waved her hands dismissively in the air. “She’ll get over it. She’s used to it. That’s just Aoife being Aoife.” With that, she bustled herself back into the drive bay.

Anna tried to relax about it all as she resumed entering the test data into the console, hoping she wasn’t going to end up in trouble on Aoife’s fifth birthday. *If I get to stay on board that long*, she thought.



# CHAPTER TWO

Stardate 47237.5 (Saturday 28/03/2370 16:40) — Deck Thirty-One  
— Room 5334, Anna's Quarters

Anna sat on her sofa, nervously slipping her residual limb in and out of the artificial leg's socket within her jumpsuit. She knew this was never a good way to fidget because it only accelerated the inevitable irritation of wearing the leg too long, but she was too distracted by stress to notice she was doing it.

She'd messaged back and forth with Worf during the day, so there was no real reason to be nervous. He'd very kindly sent her a list of expected students for the all-female, beginner level, self defence class she was going to watch, highlighting the two students who were command-track. She'd replied that nobody on that list was a problem for her, especially since she'd never heard of the two in red. She didn't tell him — as she had told nobody on board — that her pre-boarding conditional rule about not being approached by those in red really only applied to the captain. Nor did she mention that since arriving she also included Commander Riker because he'd so rudely ignored her stated boundary and crept on her at Geordi's birthday party in her first few days aboard.

It really was only those two command folks she cared to avoid, but she maintained the pretence of it being more widespread in the hopes that nobody would guess how much she loathed and feared the captain, or why.

*Anything that keeps him and his Worst Words away,* she thought. As always, merely thinking of the Worst Words made her recall them, so she squeezed her eyes shut to avoid crying, held her breath to avoid hyperventilating or throwing up, and let them play out in her mind as fast as possible to then close the door on the memory and try to regain control of herself.

That was her true fear: that if she came face-to-face with her progenitor, he'd directly say to her those horrid words he'd said to her mother about never wanting children, especially not her. She also feared he might immediately eject her from his ship, but that thought led to terrified memories of airlocks and further risked making her throw up despite not having eaten for most of the day.

Anna quickly waved her hands in the air in front of her face in a multi-pronged effort to send her anxiety flying out of her fingertips and cool herself down before she lost all physical control. She forced herself to take some deep breaths while reminding herself that neither Data nor Worf were likely to allow anyone to physically harm her.

*Worf said he'd escort me from here to the gymnasium where he holds his classes, she told herself. He's big and tough but nice to me. He won't let anybody hurt me. He promised he wouldn't. It'll be okay. I'll be okay.*

Despite repeating this mantra in her mind, the chime at the door made her yelp. She gulped, slid her leg on properly, stood, began wringing her hands together, and then nervously said, "Come in."

Worf entered, wearing a white martial arts outfit with red trim. He glanced at her hands, and then asked, "Do you still wish to come to the class?"

Anna nodded.

"You will be safe," he declared once again.

"Mmhm," she managed to reply, and then followed him out to the corridor, checking it in all directions as she went out.

As Worf approached the nearby turbolift, Anna squeaked, "Um, the lifts are scary."

Worf regarded her with confusion. "They are?"

"Well not the lifts themselves, but being in one where...anybody can join in at any time."

"I see. There is no need for concern. I can set it to a secure ride."

Anna unclenched her shoulders slightly. "You can?"

“Yes, of course. There is frequent need to ensure various visiting dignitaries are not joined at random.”

“Oh. Gosh. That makes sense. Otherwise assassins or whatever could get at them.”

Worf raised an eyebrow. “We generally try to avoid allowing assassins on board.”

“Um, well, yeah,” Anna said apologetically.

But then Worf grudgingly admitted, “However, sometimes they get on anyway. Sometimes the dignitaries themselves are the threat. It can be difficult to balance.”

“I can imagine.”

“You have nothing to fear from this turbolift ride. I will ensure nobody joins us, and that we exit beside the gymnasium,” Worf said as he tapped the call control.

Anna anxiously went along with him, wondering why Data hadn’t suggested such a setting when they’d gone to the saucer section. Then again, she’d rather enjoyed climbing through the Jefferies tubes with him, and Data hadn’t seemed to mind either.

“It’s awfully kind of you to go so far out of your way for me,” Anna said softly.

“It is no trouble. I always arrive in the gymnasium early to set up anyway, and I want you to have time to get comfortable in the space.”

“Thank you,” she replied as the turbolift arrived.

Worf exited first, then gestured to a nearby door.

Anna carefully scanned the corridor in both directions, and then scurried into the gymnasium with Worf, immediately crouching defensively and looking the room over thoroughly. A moment later she noticed Worf watching her, cringed, laughed sheepishly, and said, “Sorry.”

“Never apologise for assessing your surroundings,” Worf said. “If more people did so, there would be fewer security incidents,” he added with a hint of frustration towards the crew in general.

“Maybe,” Anna conceded. “But I got scolded at The Institute for being ‘hypervigilant as a traumatic response’.”

Worf grunted in derision. “It may be a traumatic response, but it is also a sensible one, given what you have endured. However, you may relax in here. This room is secure and I will keep it that way.”

Anna nodded and tried to make herself relax a little.

“Further, you have already noted the alternative exit, so you do not need to remain by the door.”

Anna nodded again as they both looked towards the Jefferies tube entrance in the top corner of the room above the exercise ladders mounted to the wall. She shrugged and admitted, “I knew it was there before we came up. I double-checked all the Jefferies tubes for this entire deck, and I have a good mental map of them for the whole ship anyway.”

Worf nodded appreciatively. “I am once again impressed by your...vigilance. Under most circumstances I would think that one generally inaccessible, but I have seen you climb the walls of the drive bay.”

Anna chuckled. “Oh yeah, that looks like an easy climb and then leap over to the Jefferies’ ledge. I could be up there in seconds if I had to be. It’s meant as an emergency exit out of the tube, but I could use it as an emergency entrance into the tube if I needed to.”

“Show me,” Worf said.

“Oh, uh...you want me to climb it now?”

“I will perform more evaluations of your skills and needs later, but while we wait I am curious to see how fast you could get up there if an intruder —”

Before he could finish his sentence, Anna gladly took the excuse to vent her stress via a limping run over to the ladder, followed by a remarkably fast climb to the top where she turned her momentum into a swing upwards, propelling herself neatly to the little ledge by the locked Jefferies tube entrance. She sat half-perched there, holding the edge of the door for stability, smiling down at him.

“Again, impressive. Not only are you fast, but I can see that you are more comfortable up there than down here.”

Feeling more relaxed indeed, she explained, “This is what I’m used to. Horizontal is scary because I fall so much tripping on the artificial leg, or I’m slow if I take the leg off. But up here, this is easy.”

“How long are you able to maintain balance in a precarious position like that?”

“How long do you want me to?” she replied cheekily, happy to have something to boast about instead of being afraid all the time.

“Ah. Understood.”

“I’ll stay up here the whole class if you want.” Then she sheepishly added, “I kind of like the idea of removing myself as far as possible from others, to be honest.”

“I have no doubt you could do so, and I would be interested to see you do it. However —”

The main door to the gymnasium opened and two young women entered, dressed in white outfits similar to Worf’s but without the red trim. They politely greeted Worf and went to the benches on the other side of the room to set down their water bottles and remove their shoes.

Worf nodded back at them, then turned to Anna once more to finish saying, “It may be distracting for you to remain up there.”

“Okay,” Anna conceded. She lowered herself easily back to the ladder, slid down the sides of it, and returned to Worf’s side. “I’ll play ‘normal human’ for now.”

Worf leaned a little closer and said, “There is no need to lower yourself quite that far.”

Anna laughed. Worf gave her the slightest of smiles, so she grinned back at him and then took a seat on a bench to watch the class.



“Hm,” Riker said, leaning back in the chair opposite Picard’s desk with an expression that shifted repeatedly between intrigued and confused. “Should we call a senior officers’ meeting about it?”

Picard shook his head. “I don’t think T’Char’s mysterious request warrants that level of formality quite yet, Number One. Mostly I wanted to see if you’d heard anything of interest regarding small-scale illegal mining operations or magnesite.”

“I don’t think there is anything interesting about either of those things,” Riker said with a chuckle. “But then, that’s the whole point, isn’t it? He thinks someone’s hiding something big amidst the mundane?”

“So it would seem. It’s quite the conundrum being simultaneously dull and interesting. I want to ignore it and yet pick at it until a clue falls out.”

Riker laughed and wagged a finger. “He got to you. He got you right in your Dixon Hill button.”

Picard took a deep breath, grimaced, and nodded. “He did. He’s a crafty one that way.”

Riker sat forward with his hands clasped on Picard’s desk. “How’s this for an idea? We tell the other senior officers but in a casual way, conversationally. Nothing’s on any record anywhere, nothing’s formal, nothing’s making any big deal of what T’Char said.”

“Nothing for any potential prying ears or eyes to notice,” Picard said with an understanding nod.

“Exactly. We just plant the seeds in everyone’s mind that if they notice anything about these topics, let the captain know. You’re not asking anyone to go deep-researching anything. No need to even mention T’Char yet. You simply have an interest and would like your trusted officers to keep their observations open on these topics.”

“Mmhm, I like that,” Picard said. “Except for one issue.”

Riker grinned, and they said in unison, “Data.”

“The Carlos to your Dixon Hill,” Riker teased.

“Indeed. If I’m bad about attaching my mind to a mystery, he’s even worse.”

“He’s also the most likely person to notice an irregular pattern.”

“Very true. Perhaps it’s best if I tell him myself,” Picard suggested. “And...frankly it’d just be easier if I told him about T’Char’s concerns directly so he doesn’t burn out a circuit wondering why I’m suddenly interested in such things. If the others ask, feel free to tell them as well. It’s not exactly a secret to keep. But yes, I agree that a subtle seed that the others aren’t likely to fixate upon is a good plan for now, Number One, thank you.”



Stardate 47237.7 (Saturday 28/03/2370 17:55) — Deck Twelve —  
Gymnasium Four

Anna watched Worf’s class with great interest, sitting with her left heel up on the bench in front of her so she could partially hide behind her full leg while her right leg was kept tucked under to disguise the fact that it was loose in its artificial socket the entire time. She didn’t want Worf to see her unready to leap up if he should call upon her, but she also wanted to minimise irritation in case he wanted her to perform any strenuous activity of her own later.

The Mok’bara movements Worf taught were a lot calmer than Anna had expected. At times it was more like watching a dance troupe rehearse than what she imagined a martial arts class would be like. *Then again they’re beginners*, she thought. *Maybe you have to work your way up to whacking each other with foam bat’leths?*

Anna knew very little about Klingon culture. Because Worf seemed nice, she deemed it reasonable to assume all Klingons were pleasant, genial, understanding folks. The notion that any desire for a soft, trainee bat’leth would make the average Klingon

warrior hurl their bloodwine tankard at her never even entered her mind.

Likewise when a smiling, gentle-looking, grey-haired, elderly human lady in a gold uniform entered the gymnasium, Anna also assumed she was no threat. The lady held her hands demurely clasped behind her back; her face and arms appeared somewhat frail but her midsection had the natural plumpness that came with comfortable age.

She glanced in Anna's direction, her smile broadened, and then she gave Anna an adorable little wiggle-finger wave as she sat down at the far side of the same bench.

Anna smiled, waved back, and then turned her attention back to the class as Worf wrapped it up with final practice instructions to the students.

The lady shimmied her way down the bench towards Anna, grinning merrily all the way.

Anna turned to her again and gave her a curious smile.

"Hello, dear," the lady said quietly. "How are you finding the class?"

"Oh, I'm just watching for now," Anna whispered.

"I know. Worf asked me to come along at the end to help you out in case you were nervous being alone with him."

Anna blinked. "Nervous? With Worf? Why, not at all!" she said emphatically but still whispering. "He's always been awfully kind to me."

The lady clasped her hands together before her and nodded sagely. "He is a sweet boy, isn't he?"

"Very much. If I'm nervous about anything it's..."

The lady smiled encouragingly, clearly waiting for Anna to continue.

Anna cringed a little. "I mostly don't want to look foolish in front of him or anyone else." She nodded in the direction of the class. "Watching how they balance in those stances...I can't do that. I don't want to fall in front of anybody. It's embarrassing."

The lady shimmied herself even closer to Anna. "I imagine it would be, dear, but one of the things I've learned about embarrassment over the years is that it's really other people's problem if they judge you, as long as you're doing whatever works for you," she said as she lightly tapped the back of Anna's hand.

Anna looked down and considered the lady's words. "Hm. That sounds awfully wise." But then she turned her gaze back to the lady and sheepishly admitted, "I'm still learning how to be around other people. A lot of things sound sensible but don't work out that way."

The lady wrinkled her nose playfully. "You've got some wise words of your own, my dear."

The notion of proper behaviour around others suddenly reminded Anna about expected social graces. "I'm Anna," she said. "Pleased to meet you."

"My dear, I know who you are. I like you already."

Anna had been expecting the lady to introduce herself in return, and was thus utterly baffled by the unexpected compliment. "Um...gosh. Thank you?"

"Is something wrong, dear?"

"I just...um...not at all, sorry. People have said that to me a lot lately and it's...confusing, I guess?"

"Confusing?"

Completely thrown off by the entire conversation and also noting that the students were leaving, Anna struggled to reply coherently. "I...um...I'm not sure what it means?"

The lady laughed kindly and replied, "It means people like you, silly goose. But you're not used to that, are you?"

Anna shook her head in confusion as much as an answer to the question.

The lady stood up but leaned over to say, "Well you'd better get used to it if you're going to go around being so charming."

"I'm charming?" Anna asked incredulously, almost wondering if there was someone else in this conversation she wasn't aware of.

The lady laughed again as Worf approached, her hands once again clasped behind her back. Anna hurriedly popped her leg back on to stand as well.

Worf looked to the lady and said, “Ah, Lieutenant Niven. Thank you for joining us.”

She playfully swatted up at Worf’s shoulder, which was above her own head. “Oh Worf, my dear, why be so impersonal!” Then she grinned at Anna again to say, “You may call me Granny Betty-Rose, as nearly everyone around here does.”

Anna reflexively curtsied. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Granny Betty-Rose applauded the curtsy appreciatively. “Now look at that! Haven’t seen anyone do that outside of command staff when they’re playing at diplomacy! Aren’t you as sweet as a peach! Tell me, Anna, dear, do you like pie?”

With yet another sudden turn in the odd conversation, Anna found herself answering, “Um, yes? I suppose it depends on the pie but generally speaking, yes? Doesn’t...everyone like pie?”

Granny Betty-Rose patted Worf’s arm. “Worf, she’s an absolute darling!” Then once again turned to Anna to declare, “You’re a real keeper.”

“Um...thank you?” Anna replied, glancing to Worf for rescue but Worf maintained a blank expression towards the wall behind her.

Granny suddenly reached out towards Anna and waved her hands to usher Anna further into the room, on top of the padded floor mats. “Now, you say you’re worried about falling over, yes?”

“Um, yes,” Anna said as she moved to stand where Granny directed.

“And Worf told me you’re worried that you can’t learn self defence because you’re a bit on the short side?”

“Well that and —”

Before Anna could finish the sentence, Granny leaped around behind her and put their backs together in one startlingly smooth motion. She put her hand on her head and touched it against the back of Anna’s head, then reached with her other hand to turn

Anna back around so they were facing each other once again. “Look here, you’re half a head taller than me!” she said, moving her measuring hand towards Anna’s forehead.

As much as Anna was generally not afraid of human women, she still didn’t want her face touched by a stranger. Worse, having her back touched had set off all of her internal alarms. She took an instant step back and automatically raised her hands in defensive fists before her.

Granny’s smile disappeared immediately. In a firm but calm voice she said, “It’s fine, dear. Nobody will hurt you in here. You’re safe.”

Anna nodded and relaxed her arms a little, gulping in embarrassment, yet remained on high alert.

Granny put her hands out further to touch Anna’s and gently push them downwards. “That was actually a very good start. See how fast you were? Height is meaningless in self defence.” Her grin returned, aimed at Worf. “Isn’t that so, Worf?”

“Very much so,” he replied.

Granny winked at Anna. “The first time I sparred with Worf, I knocked him clear across the room, and look how tall he is compared to me!”

Anna regarded Worf dubiously, but he sighed and then grumbled, “I was not prepared. You taught me a valuable lesson that day about making assumptions.”

“Yes I did, and now look how far you’ve come!” Granny said as she went to Worf and reached up to pat both of his shoulders at once. “I’m so proud of you!”

That caused Worf to stand a little bit taller with pride.

Granny turned to Anna again to say, “He can mostly best me now.”

Worf stood taller still.

“When I let him,” Granny added.

Worf’s posture deflated once more with yet another sigh.

Granny stepped back over to Anna as she said, “Now you, you adorable creature, I’d train you myself but I’ve been told that...I come on a little too strongly.”

Anna pressed her lips together and did not dare to agree in any observable way.

Then Granny reluctantly admitted, “Also, sickbay has issued orders against me training newbies anymore.”

Anna bit down on her lips but couldn’t help her eyes going wide with alarm.

Granny continued, “So I’m going to leave you in Worf’s very capable and much gentler hands for now. But any time you doubt yourself just because you’re smaller than your opponent, I want you to remember Granny Betty-Rose’s most important rule.”

“Yes ma’am?” Anna managed to squeak.

She leaned in close to whisper with a grin, “Nads and eyes, my dear. Hit ‘em in the ‘nads and eyes. It’s got to be both because if you do ‘nads alone they get ragey. Same time: ‘nads and eyes. Get over your fear of getting your fingers sticky with eye goop and you’ll win every time.”

Anna remained frozen on the spot while Granny patted her shoulder, turned on her heel, and walked towards the gymnasium door, where she paused to say, “I think maybe I’m going to make you an apple-cherry lattice top. Deck Thirty-One, Room 5334, right? I’ll bring it by in a few hours. Have fun, you two!” With another cute little finger-wiggle wave, she left the room.

Still hardly moving, Anna turned her widened eyes to Worf.

Worf shook his head dismissively. “Lieutenant Niven’s advice is...too advanced for you at this time.”

Anna didn’t know how to respond.

Worf continued, “It takes significant skill and a high level of boldness to perform an eye strike.”

Anna relaxed enough to pull a face at the very thought of trying to poke a foe in the eyes.

“That said, based on your previous actions I believe you can eventually be trained to do so. You have a warrior’s instinct beneath your fear.”

“What previous actions?”

Worf replied flatly, “You overcame your captor with force.”

An involuntary shudder passed through Anna. Suddenly the squishy mat beneath her feet didn’t seem stable enough to stand on, and her stomach clenched at the triggered memory of her escape from Robert Loxos. She thought she was going to fall over, but then Worf was there beside her, offering his arm to hold.

Anna tried to shove aside the unpleasant thoughts with happier memories of both Data and Geordi offering her their hands in support in her first days aboard the Enterprise. She put her hand on Worf’s offered arm and stabilised herself. Still, her voice quavered as she admitted, “I didn’t have much choice with that. I grabbed what was available and...kind of...went wild.”

“You say that as if it is shameful, but you should be proud of it. That was your warrior’s instinct coming out when you needed it most. We must tap into that and train from that foundation.”

Anna was unconvinced it was something to be proud of since she’d had to work so hard to get people to stop referring to her as “feral” upon returning to Earth. She didn’t like the part of her that lashed out when cornered and was nervous about any plan to deliberately access that. “It’s not much of a foundation,” she said.

“I will be the judge of that,” Worf replied. “Come sit for a moment and re-centre yourself. We have more to do, and there is nothing for you to fear.”



Stardate 47237.7 (Saturday 28/03/2370 18:15) — Deck Eight

Picard exited the turbolift nearest his quarters, but before he could reach his door he heard Beverly's voice behind him saying, "Good, there you are."

He turned to her and replied, "Yes, here I am."

She asked, "Had dinner yet?"

"Dinner? No. Why? Care to join me?"

Beverly grinned at him, held up a bottle of wine, and said, "That's my plan!"

He smiled, nodded, and they entered his quarters together.

She set both the bottle and a PADD down on his dining table as he went to the replicator. "I've finally gotten around to reading the report on why the Kes want me along with you for the initial discussions around Federation membership next month. Less than a month, actually, which is why I figured I'd better get on top of it."

"Hm, indeed," Picard said. "I was thinking of having a chicken fricassee in white wine cream sauce with pilaf, which will pair nicely with that that bottle you've brought. Would you care for the same?"

"That sounds heavenly, yes please." Beverly plopped tiredly into one of the chairs. "Looks like they have some unusual medical methodologies they'd like to share."

Picard ordered up the food and began moving it to the table along with the necessary place settings. "Unusual good or unusual bad?"

"Good, I think. Well, at least not particularly bad. I don't think their offerings are as unique or advanced as they seem to think. I'll need to delve into it more to be sure but it's not as if we restrict Federation membership on the basis of what science a given world has to share."

"No, but the Kes do seem to be a bit...well a little bit blustery about it all, if I'm honest."

"That's the feeling I got too, that they're putting on a bit of a show. It's hard to tell if that's just their way or..." She trailed off to take a sip from the glass Picard had just poured for her.

“Or indicative of something being hidden?”

Beverly set the glass down. “Honestly, Jean-Luc, this is why I leave the diplomacy up to you. You’re far better at sniffing out that sort of thing than I am. I’ll do my due diligence over these next few weeks to read up and be able to talk to them about their medical and science issues since they seem to want me around to do that, but I’ve got a lot of other things on my plate and we have the Cairn to deal with first anyway.”

“We do indeed.”

“How are you doing lately? Yourself, I mean?” she asked with a particular look in her eye that told him she was trying to ask him about the personal issues that she knew he wouldn’t want to talk about.

To deflect the topic as much as possible, he bluntly stated, “If you mean Anna White, nothing’s changed. I avoid her, she hasn’t contacted me, it is what it is.”

Beverly nodded sympathetically. “Okay. Understood. I’m here for you, though, if you need to talk about any of it.”

Picard smiled thinly. “I know. You’ve said so before and I promise that if there’s anything to talk about, you and Deanna will be my first ports of call.”

“Good,” she replied. Then in a clear effort to change the topic, she poked at the chicken on her plate and said, “This is fabulous. Is it a personal recipe or standard in the replicator?”

“It’s one Marie sent with her letter last month. She made it when I visited La Barre last time and I mentioned having missed it, so despite not having a replicator in the house she sent it as a program for me.”

“That’s incredibly sweet of her!” Beverly replied.

“It is. She’s on a mission to make me feel more welcome back...there.”

“Back home, you mean?”

Picard grunted.

Beverly smiled at him. “Everyone well? Robert and your nephew?”

“They are. And Wesley?”

“Actually, he seems stressed. But I suppose that’s normal for cadets.”

Picard nodded, and the two continued in genial conversation throughout the meal and coffee afterwards.



Stardate 47237.7 (Saturday 28/03/2370 18:15) — Deck Twelve —  
Gymnasium Four

“As hard as you can,” Worf emphasised. “As if you are strangling it.”

“But I don’t want to strangle anyone or anything!” Anna protested as she squeezed the padded handle on the measurement device Worf had given her.

“Then...as if your life depended on it. As if it was a branch over a chasm.”

“I’m not afraid of heights,” Anna muttered through gritted teeth as she nonetheless squeezed as hard as she could.

“Or over a raging river.”

Adrenaline surged through her at the terrifying thought of dropping into water, and she squeezed harder still.

“Good,” Worf said. “Now the other hand.”

Anna let out a ragged breath, then switched the handle to her left hand, shaking her right one briefly after the strain. She brought up the thought of dangling over water again to assist her, but this time with more mental control over the concept.

“Excellent,” Worf said, noting readings on a PADD. He then handed her a second device and directed, “Now both at the same time.”

Anna blinked at him.

“This is the last test,” he assured her.

Anna nodded resolutely and then squeezed both with all her might.

“Very good,” Worf said, taking them from her. “You may sit again.”

Anna plopped back down to the bench.

Worf tapped on the PADD in concentration for a moment, then glowered at the screen. He raised an eyebrow at it, then at Anna, then looked back to the screen, tapped some more, and then regarded Anna with a distinctly approving expression.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Your grip strength far exceeds normal human female averages.”

“Oh. That’s...good, right?”

“It is very impressive. Your average across the tests was fifty-eight kilos, and your best was sixty-point-eight.”

“That’s high, is it?”

“Standard human female average is twenty kilos.”

“Oh. Gosh.”

“The current human female record holder has tested at one hundred, eight-point-four kilos on her dominant hand. But she is exceptional and highly trained for that specific record. Most human female grip competitors score in the high sixties.”

“Golly. What do the men test at?”

Worf tapped the PADD some more. “The current record for a human male is one hundred, ninety-one-point-seven kilos.”

“I assume Klingons are even stronger?”

“Yes,” Worf replied without bothering to check.

“What about Data? Is he the strongest?”

“I am uncertain as to Data’s official strength test numbers but as far as I am aware, he exceeds all known organic records. He does not like to display his strength unless necessary. I believe he does not wish for anyone to fear him. You should not fear him.”

Anna smiled. “I don’t. I was a little worried with what happened recently but he made sure I felt safe after all that.”

“Good,” Worf said. “Back to the matter at hand —”

Anna giggled, prompting Worf to frown. She held up her hands and wiggled her fingers. "At hand, see?"

Worf grunted disapprovingly, so Anna bashfully put her hands back down.

He continued, "With your grip strength combined with the upper arm and shoulder strength and stability you have displayed, I believe I can come up with a set of self defence strategies for you that will optimise your abilities while minimising the balance and leg issues that concern you."

Anna nodded. "Okay."

"I will set up a time with you to meet again and begin training. For now, I shall escort you back to your quarters, if you wish."

Anna nodded again and followed him towards the gymnasium door. "Thank you for all of this. I really appreciate it."

"I am honoured to assist you." He stepped out to the corridor, looked around, and added, "There is nobody nearby. You may come out."

Anna nonetheless performed her own scan of the corridor as they crossed over to the turbolift.

Once inside and on their way to Deck Thirty-One, Worf said, "It would be best if you ensured you are available for Lieutenant Niven to deliver the pie she mentioned earlier."

Anna nervously asked, "Would it be dangerous if I wasn't home to receive it?"

"Dangerous?" Worf asked with bewilderment. "No, of course not. But her pies are the best in Federation space. She has won many competitions demonstrating this. Only a fool would miss an opportunity to have one."

"Oh. Um. Okay," Anna said as they arrived outside her quarters. "I'll...make sure I stay here, then."

Worf nodded. "I will bid you farewell, then, and contact you later."

"Mhm," Anna replied as she scurried into her quarters. With the door closed behind her, she stood absolutely still for a time,

trying desperately to make sense of one of the weirdest afternoons of her life.

# CHAPTER THREE

Stardate 47239.2 (Sunday 29/03/2370 07:20) — Main Engineering

Engineering was back to its normal early-first-shift level of activity the next morning as Anna carefully peeked her way out of the Jefferies tube and gradually crept in to head towards her usual work station behind Geordi.

He saw her approach and grinned widely at her. “Hi, Anna. You good?”

Anna nodded and sat down.

“I heard you were blessed with a Granny Betty-Rose pie last night,” Geordi said with a chuckle.

Not keen to talk about other elements of the previous day just yet, she simply answered, “Um, yes.”

Geordi leaned towards her in his chair with his elbows on his knees and hands clasped in an imperative conversational posture. “I have to know, Anna: was it the greatest pie of your life?”

Anna wasn’t up to explaining that she’d only ever had replicated food, or that she was confused about the circumstances of Granny Betty-Rose apparently having her very own real kitchen and baking pies that somehow competed throughout Starfleet, or how surprised she was to learn that baking contests even still existed. She’d assumed they were archaic things of the past as shown in her beloved ancient musical movies. Instead she awkwardly replied, “I think so?”

Geordi laughed again as he sat back in his chair. “She scared the hell out of you first, though, didn’t she?”

Realising that Geordi understood at least that aspect, Anna let out a sigh of relief and quietly admitted, “I have no idea how to cope with any of it, but yes, the pie was amazing.”

”That’s Granny Betty-Rose for you,” Geordi replied. “You get used to her, because she doesn’t give you the option not to. Don’t worry,

though: she's on our side. She seems scary but you'll never be as safe anywhere in the galaxy as you are in a room with her nearby."

"Maybe," Anna said uncertainly, but before she could discuss the matter further she saw Data walk through the main entrance. *I like how safe I feel around him much better*, she thought, smiling broadly and letting her shoulders relax as he approached.

Geordi looked over his shoulder to see what she was smiling at and muttered, "Uh-huh, that's what I thought" through his grin.

"Sorry?" Anna asked, though she didn't take her eyes off of Data.

"Never mind," Geordi said. "Hey, Data."

"Good morning," Data greeted them both.

"Hi," Anna said, still smiling.

"Pull up a chair," Geordi said. "Let's tell Anna what we were talking about yesterday."

Anna immediately reacted with concern, but Geordi noticed and lifted his hand in placation. "It's fine, Anna, it's all good. We just thought maybe we should make it clear to you that now that the new drive's up and running, we want you to feel free to do whatever you want here."

Anna glanced over to the shelf where task PADDs sat awaiting the next available engineer.

Data followed her eyeline and clarified, "Not necessarily routine engineering tasks. You are not required to fulfil any of those at any time."

"No, no, definitely not that stuff," Geordi said. "I mean if you really love scrubbing EM residue out of shuttlecraft exhaust ports or fixing broken replicators, nobody's going to stop you. I'm sure the ensigns would love it if you did. But with your skills, we figure there's better stuff for you to be working on."

Anna asked, "Like coming up with exhaust ports that don't build up residue in the first place?"

Geordi emphatically replied, "That would be amazing."

Data said, "It would require several material science discoveries that would yield significant technological benefits for

multiple systems. The as-yet unsolved steamed banana issue may in fact be easier.”

“The what?” Anna asked, baffled.

Geordi groaned. “Data, the steamed banana issue is unsolvable because it’s not technological. It’s repeated pranking.”

“The steamed banana issue?” Anna asked.

Geordi grumbled, “For almost as long as Starfleet has used replicators, every now and then they go haywire and produce nothing but steamed bananas. Nobody knows why. It’s not a programming error, it’s not a hardware error, and the only way it’s ever been replicated is by deliberate intent. It’s a prank.”

Data’s brow lowered, but tilted his head to the side as if he was unconvinced.

Anna was nearly as confused by this fresh weirdness as she had been by Granny Betty-Rose and her pies. *Does she make a steamed banana pie?* she wondered, but did not dare ask. *Is that even a thing? I guess you can put anything in a pie, really. There’s a whole musical about putting people in pies. Ew.*

Before her mind could get lost down a rabbit hole of contemplating pie fillings, replicator possibilities, and catchy serial killing musical numbers, Geordi successfully yanked her back to the present by saying, “Neither of those were supposed to be direct examples! Anna, the point is this: you have us here. You have this space,” he said, gesticulating around main engineering. “And you have your own lab. I can get you any other access you need; just ask. If a specific project comes up that I think would interest you or could use your skills I’ll let you know, and likewise if there’s a conference you want to go to —

Anna instinctively recoiled and shook her head. “I don’t like conferences.”

“I don’t mean to present anything, only if you want to go as an attendee. Or if one of the rest of us is going and you want to tag along and just listen, all casual, no pressure,” Geordi clarified. “You’re on the Federation flagship. There are plenty of opportunities for you to make what you want and talk to whoever

you want without any pressure from anyone. I really want this to be a place where you can blossom and thrive in your own way, at your own pace.”

He chuckled and added, “Granted, I have every professional motivation to keep you happy so you’ll stay here and share what you come up with, but on a personal level I feel strongly that Starfleet owes you a secure base of operations to find your own path and flourish.”

Data summarised, “We wish very much to give you all of the tools and support you require to make discoveries within your own comfort zone.”

Anna couldn’t help but smile at Data again. He smiled kindly in return, and the two sat like that for a quiet moment.

“Right. Support, good comfort zone, all your needs met,” Geordi repeated in a low mutter with a slow nod. “Definitely.”

Anna blinked rapidly, shook her head a little, and then turned to Geordi to reply, “Oh, yes. Thank you. That’s very kind. Of you both. Both of you, thank you.”

Geordi chuckled again.

Anna nodded and then something else occurred to her. “Oh! I do have a project in mind!”

“Great! That’s exactly what I was hoping for!” Geordi replied with a single, firm clap.

In rapid-fire speech, Anna blurted, “I was researching all kinds of different fabrics for suitable curtains for my quarters when I started researching fibre blends for possible jumpsuit replacements because although I’ve got these ones pretty good and I’m used to them, softer would be even better so I’ve been considering experimenting towards that end but don’t worry I won’t consider anything that doesn’t have the same fire and durability ratings as these ones, I promise, so is it okay if I look into that some more if I promise I won’t actually wear anything experimental into main engineering without approval first?”

Geordi took a moment to reprocess her word tumble, but once he did he replied, “Sure, as long as it’s within safety specs like you

say. And your jumpsuits might be within Starfleet specifications but technically as a consultant they don't have to be."

"I know, but not catching on fire is my preference," Anna said with a little shrug and smile.

"Well yeah? That's a...basic-level goal?" Geordi said as he laughed again. "Anyway, I need to go check in with some cargo bay management stuff for when we get to the starbase. Go ahead and make whatever you want to make, Anna. I trust you not to dress dangerously in here." He stood and added, "All good?"

Anna nodded, so he left.

But Data's brow was furrowed as he asked, "Why would you require curtains for your quarters? Is this an aesthetic preference?"

Anna meekly replied, "After you took me to the nacelle and I saw my window from outside, I realised someone might see in if they were in a shuttle close enough, or if we were docked, or something. It's silly, I know, but it made me nervous so I made some curtains I can close when I'm undressed."

"But you can toggle the external opacity of the windows."

Anna blinked in surprise. "I can?"

"Yes. Simply ask the computer to do so as with any other quarters command," Data explained.

Anna sighed, then laughed at herself. "I had no idea. That wasn't something we had on the Baltimore and I guess I didn't get to that part of the Galaxy specs."

"It was not in the original specifications, but it is now a standard feature of all Starfleet vessels."

"Golly, now I feel silly."

"I apologise. That was not my intent."

"No, no, I'm glad you told me," she said, waving her hands in the air in a brushing-away motion. Then she let her hands fall to her lap and added, "Let's pretend I hung them for aesthetics, then."

"If you wish. Do they aesthetically please you?"

She smiled brightly at him. "Mmhm! I found a pattern with both rainbows and butterflies!"

"Ah, yes. Those are motifs you appear to enjoy."

“They’re my favourites,” she said giddily. Then she sat up straighter and exclaimed, “Oh! I have a joke for you!”

“I would like very much to hear it,” Data replied earnestly.

Anna wiggled to square up before formally asking, “Do you know what I can’t ever have for breakfast?”

Data’s brow furrowed once more. He looked away, blinked, considered the question, then turned to her again to reply, “No. I am unaware of your dietary limitations.”

With an enormous grin, Anna said, “Lunch or dinner.”

Data appeared confused for a moment, but then his brow went back up. “Ah, I see. That was the joke.”

Anna giggle-snorted. “Yes, it was.”

“I understand now.”

“Wasn’t it funny?”

“I am never certain as to what is funny or not. However, I can tell that it is funny to you.”

Anna nodded emphatically. “Judy Garland says it to Gene Kelly in *For Me and My Gal* and it makes me laugh every time.”

“Then it must be funny,” Data concluded.

Anna beamed at him, and he smiled back.



Stardate 47239.2 (Sunday 29/03/2370 07:40) — Bridge

As Troi came down the ramp from the turbolift and headed for her seat, Riker announced, “There she is! The birthday girl!”

Troi sat down and nodded at Riker and Picard politely. “Thank you. It’s kind of you to remember.”

Riker scoffed playfully, “As if I’d ever forget.” He leaned closer to Picard and said in a stage whisper, “As if I haven’t practiced new songs and made sure Guinan will be serving multiple kinds of chocolate at the party tonight.”

Picard nodded approvingly but wisely said nothing, having learned years before that being quite literally sat in the middle of this pair incurred enough drama as it was; interjecting any opinions invited more turbulence than he was willing to endure.

“I’m sure everything will be lovely,” Troi said. “I don’t need anybody to go to any great lengths. Some pleasant company is all I require.”

“And chocolate,” Riker replied.

Troi conceded, “Chocolate is always welcome.”

“You are coming, Captain?” Riker asked Picard.

“Uh, oh, yes. Yes, of course,” he said with a smile towards Troi.

“Well then the company will be even more pleasant,” Troi said sweetly to Picard and then turned towards the viewscreen.

Riker stage whispered to Picard once more, “It’s going to be great!”

Picard nodded, smiled diplomatically, tugged on his uniform, and hoped someone else on the bridge would soon interject with something more professionally relevant soon.



Stardate 47239.3 (Sunday 29/03/2370 07:58) — Main Engineering

Having leisurely pored over the latest readings from the new drive, Anna leaned back in her chair to gaze appreciatively through the window into the drive bay at the cascading blue lights. She sighed happily, stretching her legs out before her under the console, and considered kicking the artificial one off for a bit.

She noticed in the reflection on the window that Geordi was returning to engineering behind her, so she wasn’t at all startled when he carefully made a point of coming into her field of vision to wave at her.

“It’s okay, I saw you coming, but thank you for not sneaking up,” she said.

“I do my best,” Geordi said as he dropped down into his own chair behind her. “See anything interesting in the drive or are you just basking in it?”

“Basking, mostly,” she replied with a little laugh. “It’s just so pretty.”

“A true beauty,” he said, enjoying the sight himself for a moment before turning to his console.

Anna reached up both arms behind her head and pondered — as she often did — how much she wished she could have a place to sleep beside the drive so she could doze amidst its glow and thrum as she did with the Baltimore’s engine as a child.

She could also see in the reflection that Data was working at the central console behind her and glancing her way regularly. Since neither Dean Covett nor Reg Barclay had been in engineering at all yet that morning, she felt quite safe and relaxed.

She let her mind wander in and around warp calculations and theories, not concentrating on any particular aspect of any of it, but simply enjoying the beauty of the entire field of study.

She didn’t notice that her hands had begun idly wrapping her braids into little buns until Data approached on her left side with a concerned expression, staring at her left ear. She looked up at him to ask, “What’s wrong?”

“You appear to have an injury behind your left ear,” he said, tilting his head in closer examination.

Anna sat up and felt around where he was looking. When her finger fell into a familiar little nick along the inner side of the back curve of her ear, she asked, “What, this?” and bent the ear out so he could see more closely.

“Yes,” Data replied as Geordi leaned over to look as well. “I had not observed that before, but it does not look like a recent injury.”

“My braids usually hang over it,” she said with a little laugh as she dropped the hair back down. “And it’s small, but yeah, it’s old, don’t worry, I’m fine.” When the two men still appeared concerned, she laughed more robustly and explained, “Just take it

from me: don't ever try to rig up a combined laser drill and plasma torch near a malfunctioning maglock while hanging by one knee over the whole thing because if you drop your bodged drill-torch into the fluctuating hypermagnetic field...um...it kind of blasts out all kinds of shooty beams of pain."

Data's brow furrow deepened, but Geordi's went up in shock. "What the hell did you do to yourself?!" Geordi asked.

Anna tilted her head with a snorting giggle so he could see it better. "It's fine! I dodged it all just in time. I mean obviously, I'd have been dead otherwise. But it cut off a bit of my ear." She righted her head back up and shrugged. "I never found the piece to be able to stick it back on so I repaired what I could as best as I could without being able to see clearly back there."

Data said, "You must have been in considerable pain."

Anna shrugged again. "Yeah, but that kind of thing happened a lot. There are good reasons children shouldn't be left unsupervised with a full set of engineering tools! I have a few weird scars left from my bad skin repair jobs. But it's okay, most of them aren't anywhere anyone will ever see, and they remind me to be safer now."

Geordi sat back down, whistled softly, and said, "I should hope so. And not to do your own medical treatments."

Anna rolled her eyes a little. "I did what I had to do."

"Yeah, and we're all glad you survived, but from now on if anything happens you ask for help, got it?" Geordi said.

"Sure thing," Anna replied unconvincingly.

Geordi sighed. "You have a dermal regenerator in your quarters, I bet."

"Not a Starfleet one!" Anna protested with a cheeky grin. "That'd probably be against regulations."

Geordi groaned softly.

Anna laughed again. "I'm fine! I'm very self-sufficient. In fact —"

"There you are, young lady!" Aisling called out as she marched into engineering, wagging her finger at Anna in a scolding fashion.

For all of her previous irreverence, Anna immediately shrank back into her chair defensively and called out, “I’m sorry!”

Aisling stopped abruptly several paces away, confused. “For what?”

“I don’t know!” Anna replied nervously. “Whatever you’re angry about!”

Aisling looked at her own wagging finger, sighed, took a deep breath, and dropped her faux outrage entirely. “I’m not actually angry, Anna. I was about to tease you.”

“Oh, sorry,” Anna replied, still distraught.

“Stop apologising!” Aisling retorted playfully.

But Anna cringed again, prompting Geordi to intervene with, “Hey, Anna, it’s okay. Everything’s okay. Nobody’s mad at you.”

Anna glanced at Geordi but then turned to Aisling again.

“I’m not mad at you, I promise! I was just playing around!”

Anna began rocking side to side a little and looked at the floor. “I just...I can’t cope when I think I’m about to get a scolding from the grown-ups.”

“But you’re...” Aisling began, hands forward, palms up in exasperated confusion. “You’re a grown up.”

Anna blinked in confusion, and said, “Oh. Right.” She sheepishly smiled at Aisling and Geordi, and then turned to Data, who was smiling at her encouragingly. One look at his kind face and Anna relaxed again, so much so that the others could see it happen.

Anna didn’t notice Geordi and Aisling exchanging a knowing look.

Geordi then shook his head at the whole escapade and asked Aisling, “What do you want Anna for anyway? I was about to ask her why anyone would rig up a combo laser drill and plasma torch together in the first place.”

Aisling said, “I was going to say...wait, what? Who does that?”

Anna cringed again, but this time in a more playful way herself, her cheeky grin back in place.

Aisling put her hands on her hips. “Oh. You. Why doesn’t that shock me?” She crossed her arms and scoffed, “Engineers!”

Geordi raised a defensive hand. “Hey now!”

Aisling retorted, “Please! You weren’t about to ask her why she’d do such a dangerous thing. You were about to ask what it was useful for.”

“I...yeah, okay,” Geordi conceded with a boisterous laugh.

Aisling groaned in exaggerated exasperation. She turned back to Anna to ask, “Do you have any idea how many questions Aoife asked about you last night?”

Feeling more confident that she wasn’t actually in trouble, Anna shrugged and guessed in light song, “*Two four six oh one?*”

“Yeah, about that many.”

Anna giggled softly. “Excellent.”

“No, not excellent!” Aisling replied, unable to stifle her own laughter fully. “Very, very tiring, actually! And careful, or you’re bucking for babysitting duty.”

“Oh I don’t think I can do that. I’m a bad influence,” Anna said in a mockingly serious tone.

Aisling snorted. “Why, because of your laser-plasma-drill-torch thing? Aoife would love that and learn far too damned much from it. You’re probably a bad influence and a good one at the same time,” she said with narrowed eyes over a grin.

Anna wagged her own finger in the air. “No, definitely horrible. I ‘lack respect for authority and have trouble identifying the correct time and place for outbursts of song.’ It’s in my assessment file from The Institute so it must be true.” Her playful tone faded a little. “Presumably you didn’t answer those sorts of questions. I mean, about my past and stuff.”

Aisling approached and took a gentler tone. “No, of course, none of that stuff. But she does think you’re the most fun person in engineering now.”

Data earnestly interjected to Anna, “You are very entertaining in multiple ways.”

Once again, Geordi and Aisling exchanged a knowing look while Anna beamed up at Data.

“Uh, yeah, right,” Aisling said carefully. Then she threw up her hands and added, “Maybe I should tell her something horrible about you to scare her away from coming down here again to see you.”

Anna helpfully suggested, “Tell her about the leg. Lots of people seem scared of the leg thing.”

Aisling muttered, “By all the Saints past and present,” under her breath as she rubbed at her forehead. Then at regular volume she said, “If Aoife finds out about your leg, she’ll demand that you let her play with it or worse, try it on.”

Anna carefully, slowly replied, “And I should...not let that happen. Right?”

Aisling turned in despair to Geordi, who merely cackled again in response. She then turned to Data, who shrugged in bafflement. “Dear sweet baby in the manger, I’m doomed, aren’t I?”

Anna waved her hands in desperate placation. “I promise to do my best impersonation of a reasonable adult any time I see her!”

Aisling chuckled and shook her head. “I guess I’d just better make sure neither Kajus or I are never late to the classroom for pickup time again.”

Anna nodded and tried to help by adding, “Assuming Aoife would only attempt to escape at the end of the day.”

Aisling blinked, sighed, turned, and began to walk away.

Geordi nearly fell out of his chair laughing.

Data’s brow furrowed once again.

Anna leapt up from her chair to follow Aisling. “Wait, you’re not angry now, are you?”

Aisling stopped in the middle of the room. “No, Anna, I’m not angry. Not at you, anyway.”

“At Aoife? I don’t understand why. I think she’s cute as a button!”

Aisling scoffed, “Oh I know she’s cute. Trouble is, so does she.”

Anna was confused. “Why is that trouble?”

“Because she weaponises it and has no regard for authority. That’s a dangerous combination.”

“It is? For who?”

“The crew. Aoife seems to be getting along swimmingly. I’m glad you like her, though.”

Anna twisted her fingers together. “Does that mean...you actually maybe would let me babysit sometime? I...I know this sounds weird but I’ve always wished for a way I could hang out with kids and relax because I never got that as a kid myself.”

With wide eyes, Aisling asked, “Let you? Are you kidding?”

Anna began to cringe again.

Aisling continued, “I was considering begging you to do it!”

Anna straightened up in shock. “Wow, really?”

”Anna, I could clear this deck faster if I announced I was looking for a babysitter than if I said there was a lethal coolant leak!”

Anna looked around the room at the other engineers nearby who were either nodding or taking a step away. “Why?”

“Because everything you seem to find charming about Aoife scares the shit out adults that don’t know how to deal with smart, sassy little kids.”

Utterly baffled, Anna asked, “Why not deal with them like we’d want to be dealt with ourselves?”

With an endearing smile and her hands clasped before herself, Aisling said, “Anna, you’re hired.”

Anna blinked, then grinned and bounced on her toes excitedly. “When?”

Aisling laughed, “Any time you want, Anna. Any time.”



Geordi headed into the large break room down the corridor from main engineering as most of the rest of the shift were coming out after finishing their lunches. He often waited for the others to be done to minimise interruptions as he ate yet still be conspicuously around if needed.

He got himself a simple sandwich and glass of water from the replicator and sat down at a table in the far corner to read reports on his PADD while he ate.

However, he was barely two bites in when Aisling appeared and sat down opposite him, coffee in hand, looking at him intently.

“Problem?” Geordi asked.

Aisling glanced around at the others still in the break room and quietly replied, “Not sure yet. We’re overdue to talk about the little romance budding before our eyes.” Suddenly she was aghast at herself as she hurriedly clarified, “I mean, before us. Our faces. Not eyes, necessarily.”

Geordi chuckled and quipped, “I have eyes, Aisling. They just don’t do much.”

Aisling groaned guiltily.

Still chuckling, Geordi said, “But yeah. You know, let’s take this somewhere a bit quieter. Come on.” He picked up his tray and she followed him out to a smaller conference room further down the corridor. Noticing she still only had the coffee, he asked, “No lunch?”

Aisling shook her head as they sat down at the meeting table. “I had a snack earlier. I’m good. Okay so...what the hell is up with those two anyway? Are they in love? Is it just me who sees it? Senses it, I mean?”

Geordi snorted, shaking his head at Aisling’s constant unintentional mention of vision. “No, it’s not just you. I can see it in plenty of ways,” he said, tapping his VISOR. More seriously he added, “But I’m not sure it’s love. At least, not yet.”

“Yeah, that’s the question, isn’t it? I’m not sure either of them knows what love is.”

“Exactly. I’ve tried to talk to Data about it but he insists he’s just being protective, a good friend, all that stuff.”

Aisling sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. “And he is being that. In spades.”

“Maybe too many spades? He watches her constantly as if someone’s about to pluck her away.”

“But I think she likes that he’s watching over her.”

“I know. I can tell. Her heart rate and blood pressure drop as soon as he comes in the room. But that’s the thing, it’s not like when I see people who have the hots for each other getting literally hot for each other. It seems more friendly than anything?”

Aisling leaned forward and swung her hands wide. “Until they make the googy-eyes at each other.”

“It’s mostly Anna making those eyes. I don’t know if Data has a ‘googy-eyes’ setting.”

“He smiles at her. Smiles, Geordi,” Aisling said as she emphatically put her hands on the table. “Like real smiles, not just his usual, ‘It is time to smile now in this social interaction,’ smiles. Maybe he’s not exuding actual warmth but don’t tell me those long looks they give each other aren’t something more than friendship.”

“Yeah, okay, there’s definitely more than friendship. But also not quite romance.”

“A kind of puppy love?”

Geordi nodded. “Yeah. Yeah! That’s it! Like...teenagers.”

“Yes, but not the horny kind.”

“No, none of that. The wholesome sort of thing in those ancient movies Anna loves so much. Like they’re about to both burst into some sickly sweet song together.”

Aisling’s eyes went wide as she slowly nodded. “Ohhh, damn, that’s exactly what it’s like.”

The two sat nodding at each other quietly for a moment, then both said in unison, “So what do we do about it?” Then they both laughed.

Geordi tilted his head in contemplation. “I mean...most of me doesn’t want to do anything about it.”

“Me neither. It’s adorable, really, but then...”

“Yeah, I can’t just ignore it. I invited her here with promises of ensuring nobody would hit on her.”

“And he’s not, is he?”

“No, and he wouldn’t. He’d never do anything to risk upsetting her. But...would it upset her?”

Aisling considered the question along with a sip of her coffee, then set it back on the table and drummed her fingers there lightly. “Right now? Maybe. Not sure, but I don’t think she’s ready for that kind of stuff. He’s dated before. She’s still really...young. I want to say ‘innocent’ but that got stolen from her.”

Geordi took a bite of his sandwich and pointed at Aisling. “Data’s not the only one being protective of Anna.”

Aisling shrugged. “Hm, all of us are, aren’t we? And sometimes I wonder if that’s in her interest or not. Like I had to point out to her earlier, she’s a grown-up.”

“They both are, and they’re both...not. In some ways. Even though he’s dated, he’s...really naive.”

“Maybe we’re coming up with things to worry about when they probably aren’t rushing into anything anyway.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Geordi conceded.

“But then, I don’t want either of them to accidentally get hurt.”

“No, me neither. Let’s maybe...let’s just be a supportive bubble around them.”

“You mean like keep an eye out for...” Aisling cut herself off and groaned.

But Geordi laughed at her again. “You can’t help yourself, can you?”

Aisling let her head fall loudly to the table before her. “Sorry. Somehow I always manage to make foot metaphors around Anna too.”

Geordi laughed even more.

Aisling muttered into the table, “I probably have no business meddling with others when apparently I have this much random ableism spilling out of my face.” Then she sat up, sighed

resolutely, and said, “So we’ve concluded that Anna and Data are fine but we’re going to keep a watch over them so we can help them if needs be, and we’ve also concluded that I’m the worst with accidental references to body parts.”

“Sounds like a lot of overthinking on all counts, Aisling. Don’t get so wound up. You’re being too hyper-aware of everything.”

Aisling scoffed, “Don’t overthink? Too hyper-aware? Damn it, Geordi, I’m a security-engineering liaison officer. It is my speciality to notice patterns between people and machines. In particular can’t help but notice that Anna and Data may be poised to start a pretty significant pattern between people and machines! And they’re cute as hell about it!”

Geordi replied calmly, “I mostly meant the overthinking about my eyes and Anna’s foot. You’re getting yourself wound up trying not to offend when what we want is to be treated like equals, not to pretend our disabilities don’t exist. They’re part of who we are. If you get yourself wrapped up in a stray phrase then that becomes the issue, not the phrase itself. Stop trying to tailor your language around our disabilities and just speak like you would to anyone else. Like you were trying to get Anna to understand earlier: nobody’s angry with you but if you constantly get worked up about it, that’s what becomes frustrating, not that you’ve noticed our prosthetics.”

Aisling nodded. “You’re right. I’m going to work on that. I’m letting my need to not be a jerk overshadow your need to just exist as yourself.”

“Well...yeah. And it wasn’t a problem until recently. You’re doing your big-sister routine for Anna and it’s setting off other reactions.”

“Yeah, probably. Okay, fair enough. I can use that concept to back it off.”

“Good. You’re a good friend and colleague, Aisling. Let’s just all relax about everything, especially those two. We can be attentive without interfering.”

“Yeah. I like that. I guess then the question is what we call them if they do get together.”

“What do you mean?”

“With all those ‘a’s in their names, do we call them Datanna or Annata?”

Geordi groaned loudly and then threatened, “If you ever say either of those words again I will take this VISOR off just to roll my actual, very real eyes at you.”

Aisling grinned. “Got it. I deserve that.”

“Yes you do. But it’s okay, Aisling. We’re all friends here. Freaky, weird, social misfit friends. We’re all going to be just fine.”

# CHAPTER FOUR

Stardate 47240.8 (Sunday 29/03/2370 21:25) — Ten Forward

Troi smiled and applauded along with everyone else at the culmination of another of Riker's lengthy jazz tributes in her honour. Then she breathed a small sigh of relief when she saw him set his trombone aside to take a break.

"Is he courting you again?" Beverly asked quietly beside her.

"No, I don't think so," Deanna replied. "He just likes to keep that door open when it suits him."

Beverly muttered under her breath, "A bit like marking his territory at times."

Deanna laughed. "A bit. I'm used to it."

Beverly raised an eyebrow, shook her head disapprovingly, but then smiled sympathetically towards Deanna.

"I'm not waiting for him to grow up anymore, don't worry," Deanna said. "He can keep that door open all he likes but it won't stop me from walking through others if I so choose."

"Any others on the horizon?"

Deanna shrugged. "I'm not sure. Unlike Will, it's not something I think about constantly."

"Constantly," Beverly repeated firmly, taking a sip of her beverage.

"Constantly," Deanna said again, nodding.

The two friends laughed together.

"Besides," Deanna continued, nodding towards Data across the room, "I'm more interested in some ongoing professional issues at the moment."

"Data? Anything I need to be worried about?"

"Him and others around him. The things you already know about."

“Oh,” Beverly said. “Anna.”

“Mmhm. Doing what I can for multiple people within a narrow set of rules for each is taking up most of my attention lately.”

Beverly turned away slightly and held her drink in front of her mouth. “He noticed us looking at him. He’s coming over.”

“Mmhm,” Deanna said again through a warm smile directed at Data.

“The hardest part is wanting all the juicy details while also maintaining professional privacy concerns,” Beverly said.

“You and I face that problem daily,” Deanna said, still smiling at Data as he approached.

“Yes but this is more intense than ever, and with higher stakes.”

“Very true. Hello, Data,” Deanna greeted.

“Hello again, Counselor, Doctor,” he said politely to each in turn. “And once again, happy birthday.”

“Thank you, Data.”

“How are you doing lately, Data? Everything going okay for you?” Beverly asked bluntly, prompting a fleeting glance of amused surprise from Deanna.

“I am very well, thank you, Doctor.” Then his brow furrowed slightly, and the two women nudged each other with their elbows at the same time. Data added, “However, I apologise if I have seemed...distracted this evening. I have been contemplating a social issue that you both may be able to lend advice towards, yet I am hesitant to ask for your opinions on such matters during a party.”

“Oh, ask away,” Beverly replied emphatically.

When Data looked to Deanna, she more temperately assured him, “We are here to help any time, Data.”

“Thank you,” he said with a polite nod. “I am trying to think of new ways to socialise with Anna as I believe my earlier efforts have proven satisfactory to us both. I have escorted her to both the arboretum and the holodeck during night shift when she feels more comfortable being in the saucer section, and we have watched an

ancient musical movie together: *The Wizard of Oz*. It is her favourite.”

“Well done, Data,” Deanna said. “I bet she really enjoyed that.”

“Yes Counselor. I am certain she would be happy to repeat any of these activities, but I wish to supply more variety, in part to better gauge what interactions are best suited towards various social needs, such as relaxation versus seeking excitement.”

“Data, you’re a prince amongst men,” Beverly said warmly.

Data appeared briefly confused, but then said, “Thank you, Doctor.”

“Have you figured out her primary interests?” Deanna asked.

“I believe so. Anna likes rainbows, butterflies, ancient musicals, puns, and challenging engineering problems. Not necessarily in that order.”

Beverly laughed softly. “That’s a good list to start from.”

“It really is,” Deanna confirmed. “I’m sure in the right context, any of those things could be either relaxing or exciting. But in particular, there are many therapeutic and social benefits to music.”

“Anna enjoys singing, though — like many other people — she suffers from significant stage fright and vastly underestimates her abilities,” Data explained. “Having seen how much more relaxed she is around most of the engineering team after overcoming the hurdle of stage fright with her presentation about the new drive technology, I am confident that if she received a receptive audience to her singing, she would come to enjoy doing that openly more often as well. However, I do not think it would be wise of me to suggest that she engage in performance at this time.”

“You think she’d be too frightened,” Deanna guessed.

“Yes. I also calculate a high probability that a negative experience would risk silencing her further, even if the likelihood of a negative experience is low. Further,” he said, turning to Beverly again, “it would be inappropriate to invite her to perform at your regularly-occurring Wednesday crew open stage concerts, as there are frequently attendees there that she specifically does not wish to encounter.”

“Absolutely, Data,” Deanna said firmly. “Anna is not ready for that.” She and Beverly then exchanged a knowing look and both glanced at the captain across the room.

“Data, have you ever played your violin for Anna?” Beverly asked.

“Not yet, no.”

“Perhaps if you were to provide a controlled, private, safe social situation where you played songs she likes on your violin, she might start to sing along.”

“That’s an excellent suggestion!” Deanna said. “Reluctant singers can often be enticed by the music itself within a safe and supportive space.”

Data’s brow furrowed and his head tilted to the side. “Hm. Perhaps I should bring my violin to her lab. She likes to sing in there. Loudly.”

“That would be a fine start, but you could also take her to the holodeck and make any environment you wish there, including rainbows and butterflies,” Deanna suggested. “That would also give you the option of adding in whatever other orchestral elements either of you wished.”

Data’s brow went up and a little smile appeared on his face. “I believe I have an excellent idea for a holodeck venue: the amphitheatre on the Academy campus. It is incorporated into the landscape with grass and trees all around, which Anna also likes very much. Butterflies could readily be added to that environment.”

“Data, I love it!” Beverly exclaimed, raising her glass to him. “You could bring in other friends as Anna’s confidence grows. That little amphitheatre holds a lot of sweet memories for so many of the crew.”

“It would also allow you to gradually add a highly receptive holodeck audience first if that made Anna feel comfortable,” Deanna said. “All the benefits of applause yet with complete control.”

Data’s smile turned into a grin, but then abruptly dropped.

“What’s wrong?” Deanna asked.

“I am uncertain.” Data looked to the side and his eyes flicked back and forth for a moment. “I believe I am experiencing significant anticipatory interest in this plan. It is...a confusing state.”

Beverly put her hand on Data’s right arm. “Data, you’re excited to go play with your new friend.”

Data’s brow went up and down several times, his head tilting back and forth in contemplation. “It would appear so, in some sense. However, I am not capable of experiencing those sorts of emotions.”

Deanna put her hand on his left shoulder. “We’ve talked about this already, Data. You could very well be experiencing new sensations, given all you’ve been through recently.”

“Hm,” Data said. “Perhaps.”

“And if you are that excited to go try out your new social experiment, you should go do it,” she said kindly.

Data shook his head. “It would be rude of me to leave your party.”

“Data, I would consider it a gift to me — equal to the lovely painting you gave me earlier — if you were to include Anna amongst the recipients of your...generous artistry. Go get your violin, and then go find Anna.”

Data grinned again, nodded, said, “Thank you Counselor! Happy birthday! Thank you Doctor!” and then hurried out of Ten Forward.

The two women watched him go, then turned to each other and nodded appreciatively.

“That was fascinating,” Beverly said.

“‘Intriguing’ as Data himself would say.”

“I am enjoying this sweet little opera very much.”

Deanna laughed. “Let’s just make sure it stays sweet.”

“Definitely.” Beverly turned to the table where the birthday gifts sat. “What’s his painting supposed to be, anyway? It’s very

bright and cheery in all the colours you love, but I can't figure out what it is beyond that."

"He said it's a fusion of cubism and pop art depicting an abstract portrait of Spot."

Beverly crossed her arms and turned her head from side to side. "Okay. I can sort of see a cat in there. Didn't he give you a painting of Spot last year too? I thought he'd stopped doing those."

"He used to give all of us paintings of Spot but I think my only appreciation seemed...abundant."

Beverly laughed. "That is a very diplomatic way of phrasing it."

"I have both a professional and personal interest in encouraging Data to keep painting subjects of intense meaning to him."

"I have a deep personal interest in wanting to hear whatever musical performance is about to happen with him and Anna!"

Deanna nodded. "I didn't want to say it in front of Data, but you are aware of the importance of those musicals to her? From her files?"

"Mhm. And how The Institute people cruelly tried to limit her on them."

"Exactly. If Data can get through to her on that path..." Deanna said with a hopeful sigh.

"Then we all just might win if that path turns into a bridge," Beverly concluded as they both looked towards the captain once more.



Stardate 47240.8 (Sunday 29/03/2370 21:40) — Deck Thirty-One  
— Room 5435, Anna White's Laboratory

When Data exited the turbolift on Deck Thirty-One opposite the door to Anna's quarters, he heard music coming from her lab door down the corridor to his right. He walked over and stood

there for a moment to listen: she was playing *Les Miserables* and singing loudly along with “I Dreamed a Dream.” He did not wish to interrupt, knowing that she was unlikely to continue to sing so powerfully if she was aware she could be heard.

But then Data looked down to the violin case in his hands and decided it was worth risking any brief setbacks if he could convince her that her voice was truly wanted.

When he rang the door chime, the music abruptly halted and Anna called, “Come in!”

As soon as the door opened, she smiled at him from her seat at her worktable. “Data!” she called out excitedly. “I wasn’t expecting to see you this evening!”

Data unobtrusively slid his violin case onto the counter to his left just inside the door and then approached the table. “You may resume your music, if you wish.”

Anna’s smile turned into a grimace. “Oh goodness, could you hear it out in the hall? Was it too loud?”

“I could, but there was nobody else nearby to hear,” he replied as he sat at the table opposite her. “You need not be concerned. It sounded very pleasant.”

“Well, yeah, it’s *Les Miserables*, one of the greatest musicals ever of all time. It’s inherently pleasing.”

“I meant your rendition.”

“Oh gosh. Well, I never know exactly how to sing along with that part in particular, because sometimes I prefer Auntie Patti’s original London version for how sweet and soft she sings it, but sometimes even when I have her on like I did just now I end up going more into Auntie Randy’s original Broadway version which is much more...you know...” she said as she held her arms out to the sides to indicate something enormous. “There’s sweet and then there’s the emotion of it and I get swept away and...anyway, I would be so ashamed if I was disturbing anyone with it.”

“The only quarters adjoining your laboratory are your own. The quarters at the fore end of this corridor after yours are unoccupied at the moment. The next closest occupied quarters are those of

Lieutenant Koval around the corner and into the next section of this deck. She requested those quarters specifically because they share a wall with a fluidics processing facility that generates consistent background noise, with one of the ship's largest electrostatic filters opposite that generates further noise. I do not believe she would hear you in her quarters even if you stood outside her door singing at maximum human volume."

Anna nodded. "Okay, good. Presumably nobody above or below can hear me?"

"In the instance of anybody complaining about hearing music through the bulkheads between decks, my first concern would be to check those bulkheads for permeations, not to be concerned about the music."

"So...no?" Anna asked tentatively.

"I do not believe you need to be concerned about your music's volume other than for your own potential hearing damage."

Anna laughed lightly with a little snort, which alleviated Data's concern immediately. "It's not that loud! I can hear myself singing over it. Anyway, look at what I've been making!" She held up a fabric swatch.

"Is this your new fabric blend?"

"Yeah. I just finished running safety tests on it and it passed so I've been sitting here playing with it in my hands. It's very pleasing and soft. Here, try it," she said, handing it to him.

Data rubbed the fabric between his fingers and nodded. "I recognise this material has the quality humans designate as 'soft', but I do not directly experience the sensation."

"Wait, you can't feel objects?"

"I can feel them, but how I experience the input is different than how you do. My fingertips have extensive neuro-receptors, but they are not the same as a human's, nor are they concentrated in some areas more than others as your nerve endings are in your fingertips. They are equally distributed on all parts of my skin and can perform more accurate measurements than a human's nerves can, which is how I am able to finely gauge metrics such as

temperature, humidity, air pressure, and to some extent material composition of items I touch. But I am unable to ascribe an emotional reaction to them. I can calculate a probability based on experience that a given texture is what humans perceive as soft, rough, pleasant, or unpleasant, but I am unable to discern those qualities via my direct experience. I can tell this fabric is soft based on its relative fibre composition, drape, and nap — plus your clear enjoyment of it — but I do not experience softness as a comfort or other emotional understanding.”

“Oh, I’m the opposite,” Anna replied emphatically. “I’m really sensitive to textures. Softness makes me happier than I know how to describe, but some other textures make me...” She gritted her teeth, cringed, and shuddered. “It depends on how much I have to touch for how long, but I can’t stand rough things against my skin at all.”

“It is my understanding that many humans find that unpleasant.”

“Yeah, I thought so too, but I’ve recently realised I’m at the extreme end of low-tolerance. And it’s not just the obvious things like painful roughness. I don’t like sitting on furniture that has a smooth, shiny covering, like polymer-based upholstery. It makes my skin feel hot and prickly. Other people don’t seem to mind. Or cloth that’s noisy.”

Data’s brow furrowed. “Do you mean crinkly?”

“No...I mean yes, that’d also be...unpleasant.” Anna pulled a face of disgust. “But I meant like sometimes the cloth you’re wearing rubs on the cloth of a chair and makes the wrong sound. I can take that if I’m sitting still but one time Dr. Cortez took me to a meeting in a board room at Daystrom where all of the chairs had a ribbed sort of fabric, and everyone shifting around in the seats made this constant low swishy-grating sound and after awhile I couldn’t hear what anyone was saying, just their backsides on their chairs, thrumming into my head.”

“That must have been a deeply unpleasant experience for you.”

“Yeah, nobody wants to think about other people’s butts when you’re also trying to do math in your head. Anyway, this stuff is soft and I feel like I’ll be able to relax even more while working in it,” she said, her smile returning as he handed her back the swatch.

“That is good,” he replied.

She nodded, but then her own brow furrowed in thought. “So how do you learn the qualities humans ascribe to the textures, then? If you can’t tell what soft is without those parameters, how do you discern the qualities that make something soft?”

“Through repeated observation, recording, compilation, and comparison of reactions to input I otherwise understand.”

“That makes sense,” she said with a slow nod. “Would you find it helpful if we got a bunch of different cloth types and I told you directly what the textures are like to me?”

Data smiled at the offer. “That would be extremely useful, yes.” But his smile faltered as he added, “However, I would not wish for you to be uncomfortable in order to facilitate such an activity.”

Anna waved her hand dismissively. “Why, I’d be perfectly fine and quite happy to do it! I don’t mind the textures if I’m in control of it and it’s not all over me. I had a bunch of samples of cloth around anyway from my research, and I can replicate some more and then we can have a full sensory experience, if you’d like.”

“I would like that very much. I find it profoundly meaningful that you would offer to assist me in this way.”

Anna beamed at him. “After everything you’ve done for me, I’d be over the moon to help you in return.”

“I believe we are too far from Earth’s moon to accurately determine our relative position to it in such terms.”

Anna eyed him for a moment as if she was trying to decide if he was serious or not, but then she burst into laughter, the sound of which made Data surmise that if “over the moon” meant “joy”, all moons must currently be beneath his feet, however improbable that must be.



With the party winding down, Deanna went to the back corner table where Worf was sitting quietly by himself. She smiled at him affectionately as she took the other seat. “Thank you for coming, Worf. I know you’re not very fond of parties.”

“I am not. However I am...” he said, trailing off into an inaudible grumble.

“You are fond of me?” she replied to fill in what she could tell he meant.

“Of course. You are a valued friend.”

Deanna put her hand on Worf’s arm. “Thank you. It’s very kind of you to say, especially for how hard it is to say.”

Worf grunted again.

“You’re a good man deep into your core. I’ve always known that.”

Worf’s expression softened a little. “Thank you. Your approval is meaningful to me.”

“I heard your approval was meaningful to someone else today.”

Baffled, Worf asked, “Who?”

Deanna noted that Picard was only a few tables away, chatting with Beverly. She studiously ignored the unspoken desire between those two as she always did and softened her voice to just above a whisper so as not accidentally distract the captain and ruin his mood. “Anna White,” she replied.

“Oh. Yes. Indeed,” Worf confirmed. “We had a good initial Mok’bara session. How did you know that?”

Deanna shrugged “I have my sources.”

Worf nodded approvingly. “There are times I think you should join my security team.”

Deanna laughed gently. “Except I can’t reveal all of my sources the way a cleanly run security team would like. People tell me all kinds of things at all kinds of levels of confidence, and I am very

careful to maximise outreach and support while minimising any potential privacy breach.”

“You walk a fine line,” Worf said with admiration.

“I do. Thank you for acknowledging that. And?”

Baffled once more, Worf asked, “And what?”

Dropping her voice low again, Deanna asked, “How is Anna doing?”

Worf raised an eyebrow. “I thought you had...sources.”

“I’d like to hear your assessment.”

Worf nodded, took a swig of his prune juice, and said, “She has many strengths and skills that can be translated into self-defence strategies, but she lacks the awareness that she is strong and skilled. I must teach her that first.”

“You mean instilling a sense of confidence?”

“That is an element of it, but at a fundamental level she is unaware of how some of the things she can do are unusual, so it does not occur to her to use them against a potential foe.”

“I suppose it’s difficult to know what’s ‘usual’ when you haven’t had much exposure to other people for most of your life.”

Worf nodded. “That is the crux of it. I plan to formulate a series of manoeuvres that will allow her to use her unexpected upper body strength to knock would-be attackers off balance long enough for her to escape.”

“I see. If attackers only see a frightened, small, young, human woman in front of them —”

“They are likely to approach her with insufficient caution.”

“Possibly even bravado.”

“Precisely. I want to teach her to invoke their hubris and then strike them back with it.”

“I think I want to learn to do that!” Deanna said with another lighthearted little laugh.

Worf replied, “I would be happy to teach you as well, though the techniques I would recommend would be different for you. You would have a better insight into their mental state, whereas I believe Anna assumes all human male strangers are an imminent,

aggressive threat and she cowers accordingly. She is very observant, but comes to the wrong conclusions. In the future I hope to help her better discern various types of foes from their body language, but for now I believe the best strategy is to make her aware of her own strength.” Then he added with another grumble, “Well before she tries Lieutenant Niven’s strategies.”

Deanna laughed again, this time more loudly than she intended and had to immediately hush herself. “Okay, I’ll admit it: it was Granny Betty Rose that told me about the session and that Anna didn’t take to her whole ‘gonads and eyes’ plan. She was a bit worried she’d spooked Anna too much, so she came to let me know.”

Worf sighed again. “I have grown so used to the Lieutenant’s...methods that it did not occur to me that she would overwhelm Anna with them.”

“Granny does come on a bit strong.”

“Granny is far stronger than her physique implies as well. That is why I thought Anna would relate to her. I miscalculated.”

“Granny’s entire approach is based on people miscalculating her. It makes sense that you’d try to get her to teach Anna that aspect of it.”

“Hm,” Worf grunted. “It would be easier to train Anna if you could be there to help her learn to calm down when there is no actual threat. For all that I admire her intense awareness of her surroundings, I do not think it is conducive to a learning environment.”

“Probably not. When our brains are in fight or flight mode, a lot of learning gets shut out. How about this: let me know when you’ve got a program worked out for her, and I’ll read it over and give you some tips of things you can say or do to help her towards the emotional goals along with the physical ones?”

Worf nodded. “I would appreciate that very much. Thank you.”

Deanna smiled warmly at him, feeling very satisfied with this level of managing both Worf and Anna in one smooth suggestion.



Stardate 47241.0 (Sunday 29/03/2370 22:42) — Deck Thirty-One  
— Room 5435, Anna's Lab

For nearly an hour Anna and Data worked with fabric samples; touching them, rubbing them between fingers and against their cheeks, rustling them, and even in some cases rubbing different types together to see what sounds and tactile sensations that produced.

When Data noticed that Anna often used terms like, “yummy”, “scrumptious”, “sweet”, “yucky”, “vile”, and even “vomitous”, he asked, “Do you experience taste sensations from the fabric as well?”

Anna laughed as she replied, “No, not unless I licked them or...” She pulled an exaggerated face of disgust with her tongue out. “Ew, even the thought of most kinds of cloth in my mouth is disgusting.”

He held up the sample she'd called, “vomitous” — a green and orange zig-zag pattern — on a texture she'd described as “scratchy”. “Particularly this?” he asked.

“Oh, good heavens, put it away, put it away,” she said, turning and shaking her head with her hands out towards it. “I'm glad that one was useful for you but it's the most horrid sample I could think of. Gross.”

“Hm,” he said as he stood and returned the sample to the replicator for recycling. “You do use a lot of words pertaining to taste. Are these metaphors?”

“Um, I guess?” she said as he sat back down. “Sometimes the colour of the fabric invokes an imaginary sort of taste, if it really looks like food.”

“Does that affect your perception of the texture?”

“Not directly, no, but it might affect how I use it. Like this one,” she said, reaching for a bright orange piece. “I don't love this

texture anyway, but even if this colour was on a nicer texture, I wouldn't make an outfit of it, because this looks like an orange and oranges are delicious but I don't want to dress like a big orange!" she said with a laugh as she set it back down. "But if I ever had a house, maybe I'd like to have citrusy curtains or something in a kitchen." She smiled into the distance. "Actually, that sounds really nice."

"I believe I understand," Data replied.

She then picked up a pale yellow one. "This is very soft but a little too thin for clothing for my needs. Not sure what I'd use this for, actually. It looks like a banana, the inside part."

"It is a very close colour match to the edible portion of a banana, yes."

"That reminds me: what's with this banana problem you and Geordi were talking about earlier? Tell me more. It sounds fascinating."

"Ah, the steamed banana issue. Most people — including Geordi — believe it is a prank, as he explained."

"But it's pretty clear you don't."

"I do not."

"Why?"

"Because there are three confirmed incidences of replicators producing nothing but steamed bananas where it is implausible as a prank given that nobody had access to those machines due to extremely tight security. One of them was on Vulcan, in a high security area at their primary Starfleet facility, accessible only to Federation diplomats."

Anna nodded. "And Vulcans aren't really known for pranks, so it's unlikely staff at that facility made that happen."

"There are Vulcans who reject logic, and there are Vulcans who do have more of a sense of humour than most, but even if an atypical Vulcan had gained access to that replicator, it was under constant surveillance by camera, network, and stationed guards. While I cannot prove there was no tampering, I consider it so highly unlikely as to convince me there must be another cause."

“Geordi said it goes back to the first Starfleet replicators.”

“Correct.”

“So...could it be something in the original coding? A prank there that has somehow stuck around?”

“That is an entirely valid hypothesis. However, no trace of such a coding prank can be found, and many have looked thoroughly. Even if it is some sort of originating prank, that is what concerns me.”

“Why?”

“Because if there is legacy hidden code in replicators that can generate that error, that is a security concern.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” she said, nodding. “Gosh. Well, I can tell you that I never saw it happen on the Baltimore.”

Data’s brow went up. “That is useful information, given the isolation and low usage of those replicators compared to those on more active vessels.”

“But it’s not solid enough to base any kind of conclusions on. It’s just another probability indicator.”

“Correct.”

Anna put her elbows on the table and chin in her hands. “Huh. It’s funny, but also kind of creepy.”

Data nodded. “I have heard it described both ways. Starfleet engineers tend to have strong opinions on it. Mine is the minority.”

“Well...it’s fun to talk about. I mean it’s...bananas!” she said while extending her arms wide in a flourish, finishing with a giggle.

Data’s brow furrowed again, then went back up. “Ah, yes, a jesting metaphor meaning silly, bonkers, kooky, wacky, and other terms indicating social aberrance.”

Anna snorted another giggle, which Data enjoyed a great deal. She said, “Yeah, humans are weird.”

“You are yet again speaking as if you are not included in that set.”

“Well, like I told you before, I often feel like *I’m tap, tap, tapping on the glass, waving through a window,*” she sang softly.

Data nodded again. "I understand."

Anna smiled at him in that beaming way that captivated him. "Yeah, you're one of the few who do."

Deciding that was a good time to introduce his original purpose in coming to her lab, he said, "I also very much like it when you sing, even in little fragments like that."

Her smile turned shy and she shrugged.

"What I do not understand is why you characterise your singing as merely passable when in fact you consistently demonstrate extreme talent."

She snorted with laughter again, but this time with a more dismissive tone. "You're being far too kind again."

Data shook his head. "No, I am not. Nor am I overstating my opinion out of friendship. Your singing is subdued but every note is perfect."

"I had to learn to sing quietly pretty quickly after I got back to other people. I let you hear, and Geordi and a few others I trust, but I got scolded for doing it at The Institute and I learned to hush it up and keep it to myself most of the time. But it still leaks out because I can't help it. These songs, they're like...well I don't believe in souls but if I did, they're my soul. When I sing — like really sing, belting out something at full volume — that's me letting my soul erupt out and if anyone could hear it I might get in trouble or someone might say something awful. Someone might tell me how I got it wrong or wasn't as good as someone else or it's silly or stupid or something that would be like an arrow into my heart and rot me from the inside out."

Data tilted his head slightly. "Hm. It is precisely that sort of depth my own music lacks."

"What?" she asked with surprise. "How so?"

He explained, "I enjoy playing the violin and several other instruments, and singing as well, but I have been told that while my violin recitals are technically perfect, they lack 'heart'."

Anna made a scoffing sound as she crossed her arms. "Sounds like jealousy to me."

Data's brow furrowed again. "I do not understand."

Anna said, "Another terrible thing I learned about humans fast when I rejoined them was they get really gate-keepy about these things. You're supposed to suffer for ages in learning an instrument like the violin, so if you can just pick it up and master it easily, that threatens stupid, petty humans. If one of them could play it perfectly, they'd laud that as genius. They're just jealous that you can do it without suffering first, but suffering isn't much fun so I don't think it ought to be required."

Data's brow went back up. "Hm. That is an interesting hypothesis."

"I'm probably all heart and no perfection, despite your kind compliment earlier. That's why I can't play an instrument. Instruments need control and precision. That full-on belt-out soul-baring thing, I lose control in those moments. My whole body contorts to let the music come out. Another reason I don't want just anyone to see me. I'd feel so strange being seen like that. Vulnerable and...wild," she said, twisting her mouth to the side at the last word and crossing her arms again.

"Intriguing. For your assurance, I would not judge you for whatever bodily positions you assume to sing. In fact my original intent in coming here this evening was to invite you to the holodeck to participate in music with me," he said, pointing to the violin case on the counter behind him.

She uncrossed her arms as she turned with great interest. "Oh. Um...gosh. I'd really love to hear you play."

"I have a program in mind for the holodeck that I believe you would enjoy. A small amphitheatre surrounded by trees and grass, and we could add butterflies if you wish."

Her entire posture changed as she beamed at him in pure delight once more.

Satisfied with this result, Data said, "I anticipated you would like that."

She put her hands on her cheeks, then wrung her hands before her. "I always dreamed of singing on a stage, before I learned how mean people could be."

"There will be no mean people in the holodeck. It can be just the two of us, or we can program in a receptive audience if you prefer."

"Oh I'm not ready for an audience."

"I anticipated that as well. Would you care to join me, just the two of us, then?"

"Now?"

"It is late in the evening, similar to the time we went to the arboretum. I am certain the holodecks will be available. I am also certain that nobody you wish to avoid will be in their vicinity this evening as they are engaged in another event. When that event concludes the attendees are most likely going to return directly to quarters, all several decks above the holodecks."

Anna's excitement returned. "Ooo, this is so tempting!"

Data stood and offered his hand. She gleefully took it and stood, hopping towards him. Then she looked down, laughed, and said, "I should probably put my leg on."

"If you wish," he replied.

Once she had put on her leg and he had retrieved his violin, they went out to the corridor. Data began to pass the turbolift, heading towards the Jefferies tube they had climbed together towards the arboretum. But Anna stopped him, saying, "It's okay, Data, I know how we can use the turbolifts now. Worf said any of you senior officers can set it to a secure mode so nobody else can get on."

Data blinked rapidly at this new information. "Ah. I had not considered that possibility. I apologise for not realising it in the past."

"It's okay, I also like climbing around the tubes with you. But let's take the express route today," she said with a grin.

Data nodded and touched the console to call the lift.

Once they were safely inside the holodeck with the program running and extra butterflies added, Data began to play his violin on the holodeck's stage, beginning with "Somewhere Over the Rainbow".

As Troi and Crusher had predicted, it did not take long for Anna to enthusiastically join in. She joyfully stood beside him on the amphitheatre stage and belted out her favourite song, much to his great satisfaction.

# CHAPTER FIVE

Stardate 47241.9 (Monday 30/03/2370 07:10) — Bridge

“We’ll be arriving at Starbase 219 this evening, current ETA of about 18:30,” Riker announced.

“Very good, Number One,” Picard said as he sat down in his chair and tugged down on his shirt. “Anything else to report?”

Riker looked at the screen embedded in his chair’s arm. “Only the typical agenda items when approaching a starbase: boarding requests, cargo requests, nothing out of the ordinary. Everything’s already been directed to the relevant departments as necessary.”

“Excellent.”

Troi said, “I’ll bring my mother aboard myself when she arrives ahead of the Cairn in a day or so.”

“Very good, Counselor,” Picard said with no visible emotional response.

Troi sensed his true feelings about the matter nonetheless, and put on a small, diplomatic smile.

“Should we throw you a second birthday party so she can join in?” Riker asked with a grin.

“No thank you, that won’t be necessary,” Troi replied firmly through that diplomatic smile. “There’ll be the banquet in a few days when the Cairn come on board as well.”

“I see,” Riker said. “Let Ambassador Mom dominate her own party?”

Troi cleared her throat meaningfully, nodded slightly in the direction of the other crew members on the bridge, and then shot Riker a much colder, pressed-lips warning smile.

“Got it,” he said, chuckling to himself nonetheless.

Worf entered the bridge and strode purposefully to Troi, handing her a PADD.

She took it, asking, “What’s this, Worf?”

“I have taken the liberty of drafting a personal self-defence training plan for you, as per our discussion last night.

“Oh, that’s very kind of you, thank you. I wasn’t expecting you to do it so quickly,” she said.

“I was drafting the other plan we discussed anyway so it was no trouble to make up a secondary one. However, it will be several days before I can accommodate you into my training schedule.”

“That’s fine, Worf. I wasn’t in any rush. You should focus on the other person first. I’m going to be quite busy these next few weeks myself anyway.”

Riker asked her, “You must have taken Academy self-defence courses, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but I can’t say that I excelled at them,” she admitted. “A personalised refresher is quite welcome,” she added with a pleasant smile towards Worf.

Worf nodded firmly in reply.

“Yeah but you don’t have to worry,” Riker said. “I’ll keep you safe.”

Troi clenched her teeth behind her increasingly irate smile at him. “I’m sure you will.”

Riker finally noted the warning signs and backed off by quickly adding, “Not just me. All of us, I mean.” He pointed to Picard, Worf, and others around the bridge, none of whom dared to interject a word into this familiar, awkward banter.

Troi sensed the heightening tension so she took a deep breath, relaxed her posture, and said in a genial tone, “Don’t worry. I feel entirely safe. But it’s always good to learn more. I’ve been thinking a lot lately about broadening my professional horizons.”

Without looking at either of them, Picard joined the de-escalation by saying, “Always a laudable goal, Counselor.”

“Thank you, Captain,” she said, knowing he’d understand she was thanking him for his support on multiple levels.

Riker shrugged it all off and tried to change the topic himself. “Who’s the other person you made a plan for, Worf? Anybody else

we need to be ready to defend?" He leaned forward in his chair and made a series of vague martial-arts style chops in the air.

Worf visibly withheld his reaction to Riker's faux air-chops. "Specialist White."

Troi glanced at Picard, feeling his pained reaction but seeing that he remained perfectly composed as if the name meant nothing to him.

Worf continued, "Though she was successful in defending engineering from the Tarkanian intrusion, she was clearly frightened by the event. I offered at the time to help her learn some self-defence skills and she has recently taken me up on the offer."

"Hm," Riker grunted as he settled back into his seat. "Maybe it's us that will need defending from her."

"What do you mean?" Troi asked, baffled.

Riker shrugged widely. "Just that more and more it's weird how she came on board to do the new engine, it went badly but was fixed up anyway, and yet she's still here."

Troi could feel Picard's rising frustration. She tried to diffuse it and Riker's odd comments by saying, "Geordi made it clear from the start that he was courting her as an engineering consultant to stay on board long-term. I think it's wonderful that she wants to join the crew."

"If you say so," Riker said. "I'm simply not a fan of non-Starfleet folks having that much access to engineering."

Troi was considering listing the many other specialists that come and go, but before she could recall any of their names Picard all-too-calmly said, "I wouldn't worry about it, Number One. I'm sure Mr. La Forge has it all well in hand."

"I guess," Riker said with another, smaller shrug. "Have you met her?"

Picard answered coldly, "No."

Troi could feel the pain radiating off of him. Her mind raced to think of a way to change the topic once more.

But Riker went on, “I have, briefly. I don’t know, maybe I just don’t like people who are that...skittish. Feels like it means they have something to hide.”

Worf turned and started up the ramp towards his usual position at the tactical console, saying as he went, “It is my hope that training her will help minimise that...skittishness.”

“Okay. Good luck with it,” Riker said dubiously.

Troi leaned forward enough to catch Picard’s eye. He glanced at her, and in that brief moment of eye contact it was clear that each of them knew what the other would say if they could speak openly.

Instead, Picard gave her a tiny nod — his usual indicator to her that he was in control even if his emotions were running high — and resumed staring at the viewscreen despite there being nothing of particular interest upon it other than distant stars whizzing by.



Stardate 47241.9 (Monday 30/03/2370 07:15) — Main  
Engineering

Engineering was busy when Anna tentatively entered, but since she couldn’t see Reg or Dean around she happily bounded in, still glowing from her holodeck time with Data the night before.

Andrea noticed her first and commented, “You’re in a good mood!”

“I am!” Anna replied. “In part because I’m debuting my new jumpsuit,” she said as she twirled once with pride.

Andrea looked a little nervous as she asked, “It’s...new?”

“It looks the same, but here, feel how soft it is,” Anna said, extending an arm out.

Andrea felt it and nodded approvingly. “Very soft.”

Geordi — working on the other side of the central console — glanced up and said, “That’s great. Glad it worked out for you.”

“It really did,” Anna replied cheerily. “Lots of things are working out all of a sudden. I feel really comfortable so I want to have a nice, comfortable day.” She stuffed her hands into the large side pockets and approached the console to stand beside Andrea.

Andrea said, “If I didn’t have to wear proper uniform in here all the time, I’d wear pretty dresses.” She batted her eyes a little at Geordi, but he studiously kept looking at the PADD in his hand and the central console.

Anna nodded, also looking at the console enough to have failed to notice Andrea’s attempted flirtation. “I wanted to wear pretty dresses when I was a kid, but the replicated ones available on my ship were always too hot or too itchy or too in the way or all of the above.”

Geordi muttered, “Yeah, dresses don’t make for safe engineering. Skants, maybe.”

Lieutenant David Sorenson’s voice came unexpectedly booming from the drive bay, “I love my skant but I want my legs covered in here.”

Geordi glanced at him. “Right?”

Aisling entered from the corridor and handed Geordi another PADD. The latter nodded, took it, and set it down on the console.

Anna said, “There was actually one skirt I loved enough to replicate a few times.”

Andrea asked, “Because you kept growing out of it?”

“Oh no,” Anna replied. “Never lasted that long. I kept accidentally destroying them with, you know, fire and...stuff.”

Aisling groaned. Geordi winced. Several other engineers around grinned and chuckled.

Anna continued, “It was red and white and twirly, like —”

“A lollipop?” suggested Lieutenant Junior Grade Edita Falkenova from the fore of engineering.

“Yeah! How’d you know?” Anna asked.

Multiple engineers piped up in unison, “Red Peppermint Skirt Number Twelve,” and then all laughed together.

Anna was confused.

Andrea explained, “A lot of us wore that when we were kids. It’s been popular forever.”

Aisling added, “Aoife’s on her third one already. She keeps destroying hers too, but thankfully just with art supplies, not with fire,” she said sternly towards Anna.

Anna giggled guiltily.

Lieutenant Arjun Pierson explained further, “It was one of the first children’s garments put into common replicator programs.”

Geordi nodded. “If our school had had a uniform, it would have been that by default. Almost everyone wore it.”

Mei muttered, “I did not. Always hated skirts.”

Edita rolled her eyes. “Yes, but if you were going to wear one...”

Mei conceded, “Yes. All right. I would have picked the twirly lollipop one.”

David leaned on the drive bay door arch and sighed happily. “That thing twirled like nothing else.”

Lieutenant Liz McGrath leaned over the bars from the upper deck around the drive bay, stretching her arms outward. “It made you feel like you could fly!”

“Oh! Exactly!” Anna said, then bounced on her toes and clapped her hands with glee. “Oh! Oh! I love this so much!”

Aisling smiled at her indulgently. “It’s nice to have a shared childhood memory with others, isn’t it, Anna?”

“It’s the very best thing! I’ve never had this before! Oh gosh I’m so happy I feel like...like...” she pumped both arms in the air, hopped on her biological left leg, and squealed loudly.

Her joy was infectious; everyone around her couldn’t help but smile.

David clapped his enormous hands together loudly. “Aha! Red Peppermint Skirt Number Twelve wins again!”



With everything under control on the bridge and no other pressing issues to attend to until they arrived at Starbase 219 that evening, Picard took some time off in his quarters to consider matters of a more personal nature. Mention of Anna was hard enough, Riker unknowingly poking Picard in the fact that he had not yet met his potential daughter was even worse, but having to sit there with Troi clearly sensing his discomfort was more than he felt like dealing with.

Further, he realised that after the repeated gut-punches of having viewed Anna's logs from the Baltimore, he hadn't watched any more for about a week. Her intense reactions to discovering that a warning buoy placed in orbit around Covaris Two had been important for him to see, but nonetheless emotionally taxing.

*If I'm going to view more, best to get that out of the way before I'm busy with things at the starbase this evening, he thought. Especially if Deanna's prediction that Anna may seek me out at any time comes true. Preparation is key to handling any diplomatic confrontation. I just hope Deanna is wrong about her other prediction that it may take months to happen.*

With a resolute sigh, he retrieved the isolinear chip containing the logs and plugged it into his desk terminal.

As usual, Anna failed to start her log with an identification of the stardate, but he could see from the file that the original was recorded on stardate 44332.2, which was about six o'clock in the morning on May 2, 2367.

*The morning after her launch and terrible discovery, Picard realised, noting how she looked more calm — quite nearly sedate — compared to her chaotic emotions of the day before.*

She didn't look into the camera as she rattled off some initial systems reports, clearly reading off of her console before her as she sat in the shuttle's seat that had become the pilot's chair for her

bodged-together ship. As she finished reading off the nominal statistics, she summarised, “Everything’s fine, more or less. As expected for a ship held together by weird patches and thin strings of hope.”

She shuddered, and he noted she was no longer wearing the EV suit she’d worn during the launch. “It’s cold. Like...really cold.” She tapped the console ahead of her and frowned at it. “Life support is set to normal parameters and I’ve already upped the temperature to the higher settings within that, so I shouldn’t feel cold. But...I do.”

She bent down and looked past the imager out into the open space ahead of her ship. “I think maybe I forgot that outer space is cold.” She crossed her arms and rubbed her hands up and down over her shoulders, shuddering again. “It’s like...the coldness is getting in, even if I know logically it isn’t.” She added with a wry chuckle, “I mean, all of these sensors would be going off if I had leaks. And happily there are no leaks yet. Apparently I’m pretty good at welding.”

She tugged her sleeves over her hands and yawned. “It’s in my head, most likely. I’m used to constant sun coming in the windows making warm spots, and now that’s gone. And I haven’t slept, so probably that’s not helping. And...the darkness is just...so...big.”

Her voice changed in clear imitation of someone that sounded familiar but Picard couldn’t immediately place it. She quoted, “I don’t like this forest. It’s...it’s dark and creepy.” The line tickled at the back of his mind as something he’d heard before but again, could not place.

Anna returned to her normal voice as she poked her right fingers out from her sleeve cuff. “My fingertips are blue. Is that bad? I don’t want to push the temperature up too high in here. I don’t want to waste power.”

She sighed, pulled the hand back into the sleeve, and looked to the console again. “I’ve been experimenting with speed over the last few hours. Definitely stable up to warp five-point-eight. I probably could go to six but pushing beyond a transition threshold

will take a power surge, so I'm not sure it's worth it until I'm sure everything's gone smoothly for a good long while."

Picard recalled that she'd become an expert in transition thresholds, hence her entire reason for being on the Enterprise for the new drive installation they'd just completed.

In a low grumble she added, "It's not like I'm in any great rush to get anywhere right now anyway. I'm pointed towards Sol but...yeah. We'll see."

She sniffed briefly as if her nose was runny, and then shrugged. "I looked up the local area based on my very, very outdated star charts and probably Kessik would be the closest Federation port of call, but...I'm not really ready to take rejection head-on if they're going to be jerks like the rest of Starfleet. Um, so I figure for now I'm going to point myself out of the Delta Triangle as fast as I can and see if anyone answers my distress call. Because — oh yeah, I forgot to mention — I did actually start one. I'm not sure if that's a good idea or not but sometime overnight I decided better to have it on before any emergency hits, in case my welding isn't as great as I think it is."

Still not looking at the camera, she softly sang, "*Are you out there? Do you know me? Can you feel me? Can you show me?*" She pulled a face and said, "It's different. Elsa was doing call-and-answer with elemental creatures. I'm just calling and there's...nobody. I want pretty rainbow sparkly lights to come show me the way too. *Where are you going? Don't leave me alone. How do I follow you into the unknown?*"

After her held note trailed off, she sat staring forward into space for a moment, and then whispered, "It's so dark. Is this why so many ships got lost in the Delta Triangle back in the old days?" She shuddered again.

It occurred to Picard that he hadn't thought of the Delta Triangle in years. It had definitely been a threat to Kirk's Enterprise and other ships of the day due to interferences with sensors, but sensor technology had vastly improved well before the Baltimore launched. Starfleet wouldn't have sent a small crew to

survey the systems in that area for possible terraforming if it was still thought of a threat, so he wasn't sure why Anna considered it dangerous at all.

*Then again, he realised, her ship crashed inside of it. That might be enough to make anyone nervous about such a zone, especially a child who had suffered alone inside of it.*

She answered his question herself. "I know it's not a real thing anymore. I just...I want out of it. So even though Kessik is at one of its points I'm not headed directly there. I'm going the shortest way out that's vaguely pointing towards Sol. Then once I'm out, I'll see what happens next."

Her brow furrowed. "Do I even have family on Earth anymore? Is Grandma still alive? Probably not. Mom said she was going into the hospital for something. I remember being worried but knowing better than to ask questions. Gosh, that was only a few days before we crashed. All the grownups were busy and tense about everything.

"Anyway If Grandma was alive, I think she'd have made someone look for me or at least get my body or something. So...she's probably dead.

"In fact if I had any remaining family and none of them bothered to find me, is it worth trying to get home to them? What are they going to do if I just show up? Reject me like...he did?"

Picard looked down at his hands in shame.

"There's his family, presumably, but I have to assume they don't even know I exist. I have to assume they don't want me any more than he did."

Picard paused the video, and then leaned his head into both hands, the guilt weighing upon him. *She's right*, he thought. *Robert, Marie, René, none of them know about Anna. Then again...do I really know about her? That she's even mine?* It occurred to him that he'd gotten used to assuming she was his child — even hoping for it to be true, most of the time — but that for all he knew she could be referring to some other man, some

other father. The fact that she resembled his mother could be complete coincidence, or wishful thinking.

That was the moment he realised that he was indeed wishing for it to be true, and if he was honest with himself, he'd been wishing he'd taken time to have children for some years now.

He thought about the children on board he'd formed relationships with, especially Wesley. Picard sat up and said, "Computer, record a voice message for Cadet Wesley Crusher at Starfleet Academy."

"Recording," the computer replied.

"Wesley," he said, tugging his shirt down definitively. "I just wanted to send you a quick note to say...to say I'm sorry. I apologise for all of the times I told you to 'shut up'. That was an inappropriate way to speak to you. Or any other times I may have seemed harsh or...distant. You were and remain a valued member of this crew and I had no business speaking to you disrespectfully like that. I fully apologise. I..." he faltered, suddenly feeling very awkward. "I hope you are doing well in your studies. I have faith in you to succeed. Keep up the good work, Cadet," he ended in a highly officious tone. Then he ordered, "Computer, send message," before he could change his mind about it.

The apology to Wesley assuaged his guilt somewhat, so he unpaused Anna's log.

Anna began singing again. "*Must I travel far and wide, 'til I am beside someone who I can mean something to? Where? Where is love?*"

Picard recognised that tune from *Oliver!* and sighed loudly at it, trying to avoid another wave of guilt at Anna's plaintive little voice.

Anna's eyes suddenly went wide. "What if there was a war? What if Earth is...gone? What if there's nobody left at all? Or everyone that is left is, I don't know, evil or something? Gosh."

He leaned forward again, thinking, *Well at least that part of her supposition was wrong. Earth remains safe. I've at least done that part of my duty well enough.*

She continued, “Or what if it’s the opposite? What if everything there is perfectly lovely and beautiful and they just didn’t know I was stuck there, under that horrible buoy?”

Yes, he thought at her. *That’s right. That’s it exactly.*

“What if...oh gosh what if I do have a family that’s wanted me all this time?” She thrust her hands out of her sleeves to clasp them before herself, finally looking directly into the imager, which felt like she was looking at him. “I’ve tried so hard to be good! To be someone they’d want! To be someone...he’d want...”

Picard winced.

*“Papa, can you hear me?”* she sang.

“Good lord,” he whispered, knowing what song was coming, bracing for its impact and feeling somewhat irritated at its maudlin nature.

*“Papa, can you see me? Papa can you find me in the night? Papa are you near me? Papa can you hear me? Papa can you help me not be frightened?”* she sang, her voice rising until she belted out, *“Looking at the skies I seem to see a million eyes which ones are yours?”*

It took all of his effort not to look away. Just as he felt he might do so, she went silent. Tentatively, he let out the breath he hadn’t realised he was holding.

Anna wiped tears on her sleeves and sniffled some more. Then, once again staring out into the darkness in front of her ship, she said, “I don’t know. Maybe I’ll get lucky and this ship I’ve cobbled together will explode when I’m sleeping and I’ll never have to know any more awful answers to any of these questions.”

She sighed, rolled her eyes, crossed her arms defensively, and looked at her console again. “But everything looks fine so far. Turns out I’m really, really good at spaceship stuff. Too good for my own good, maybe.”

“You’re extremely good at it,” he answered her aloud despite knowing her past self could not hear him.

She looked into the imager again and whispered, “I’m scared.”

He nodded. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Please,” she pleaded, “someone just answer my call so I don’t have to be scared and alone anymore. Please.”

With that, she ended the recording.

Picard slumped back in his chair. He was glad he’d sent the message to Wesley, but it wasn’t helping with his guilt much anymore. Nor were thoughts that Anna might not be his. He felt as though someone ought to experience this guilt, to bear witness to her pain, even if she wasn’t assigned to him via DNA.

But then he frowned deeply, vaguely annoyed at her melodramatic song choice. That in turn refreshed the guilt as he realised how unfair it was to think such an uncharitable thought at a young woman suffering so much.

*But it is annoying, he thought. All of this is so damned frustrating and annoying and tiresome. All of her suffering is ridiculous and unnecessary. This whole situation, from her creation through to all these terrible things that happened to her, none of it should have happened. Nobody should have had to ever go through such torment. The very fact of her is annoying. And yet...*

*He sighed and closed his eyes. And yet, I am so grateful she exists, and the truth of it is I want her to be mine. I want to go to her. I won’t. I promised Deanna I’d be patient but...I want this whole sorry business wrapped up and dealt with. As soon as possible.*



Stardate 47242.5 (Monday 30/03/2370 12:10) — Main  
Engineering

“Okay folks,” Geordi called out loudly while standing by the central console with a stack of PADDs in his arms. “Gather ‘round for assignments for when we get to Starbase 219 this evening.”

Aisling raised her arm like a dutiful schoolgirl. “I’ll take whatever you’ve got for cargo bay security and processing if I get to pick my own team.”

Geordi handed her the top PADD from his pile. “I already assumed you would. It’s yours. Take whoever you need. I already know who you’re picking anyway.” They grinned at each other as she took the PADD from him.

“Right!” Aisling called out. “Tyler, White, let’s go get Mack!”

Andrea quickly filtered through the engineering crowd to stand by Aisling, but Anna remained in her chair, staring idly at her usual console.

“Ahem,” Aisling called in her direction. “Anna?”

Anna turned, blinked in confusion, and then frowned as she mentally replayed the conversation that had been all around her moments ago but that she’d been ignoring. Her eyes went wide as she said, “Oh! White! That’s me!” She giggled apologetically as she stood up and worked her way over to Aisling.

Dean, who was standing halfway between them, muttered loud enough to be heard by everyone nearby, “Some genius. Doesn’t even know her own name.”

Anna stiffened but walked past him.

Geordi’s genial smile evaporated. “Hey. Lieutenant Covett. Which part of, ‘Lay off Specialist White,’ are you still struggling to understand?”

The room fell silent, and everyone stiffened at Geordi’s unusual usage of formal titles. Covett shrank back against the console behind him, glaring at the floor.

Aisling broke the silence and redirected Anna’s attention in particular by saying in an indulgent, maternal tone, “Yes you, you silly sausage. Come on.”

Several stifled giggles and snide looks towards Dean fell into the background behind the three as they walked out of engineering, just as Geordi re-assumed control by calling out the other assignments.

As they approached the turbolift, Aisling said, “Don’t worry, we’re staying in the drive section, only going down three decks, so turbolift is okay, right?”

Anna nodded, but twisted her fingers nervously nonetheless. “Why ‘sausage’?”

Aisling laughed. “My Nan used to call us that, the lot of us, all twenty-seven great grandchildren.” She put on an Irish accent and an elderly-sounding voice to say, “Get in here for your lunch, you silly sausages, or I’ll eat you up myself!”

Anna’s eyes went wide. “Gosh!”

“She was kidding, Anna!”

The turbolift door opened and the three of them entered.

“Oh. Right. Of course. I knew that,” Anna said nervously. “But...twenty-seven! And a great grandmother? I can’t even imagine a big family like that.”

Andrea said, “The Kelly clan is huge,” gesticulating widely with her hands.

“Kelly?” Anna asked.

“Yes, that’s my family name,” Aisling explained. “I took on Kajus’ when we got married because...let’s just say complicated reasons of importance to him. But the deal was I got to give our kids proper Irish first names.”

“But...Kelly? Like...Gene Kelly?” Anna asked tentatively.

Andrea sighed and said, “Oh, here we go again,” as the turbolift doors opened.

The two officers stepped out quickly to Deck Thirty-Nine but Anna followed more reluctantly, carefully scanning the empty corridor ahead first.

Aisling preened at her. “Yes, Gene Kelly is my very distant ancestral cousin. Come on, in here,” she said as she pointed to a door to the starboard labelled 5418, Contingency Crew Accommodations.

Anna’s jaw dropped and she finally stopped twisting her fingers. “Jiminy Crickets!” she breathed out as an awed gasp.

Andrea rolled her eyes playfully. “‘Very distant ancestral cousin’ describes the link between nearly any two people on Earth. But I’ve heard all about this before and the Kelly clan knows all its parts, I’ll give it that. It goes with the religious heritage.”

“Religious?!” Anna asked. “People are still religious? I’ve noticed you say religious words now and then but I didn’t think anyone actually believed that stuff anymore.”

“Not many,” Aisling replied. “But there’s a streak of it in some of my family members so I’ve picked up the phrases. I’m firmly atheist, though. That’s part of why I left for Starfleet. Come on into our little hideaway,” she said as she entered the room.

As they followed Aisling in, Anna looked around intensively, taking in every detail of what looked like a combination storage room, fluid processing centre with large magnetic fractionators along the starboard wall, and small quarters along the port wall. In the fore starboard corner there was a partially walled-off aid station, and in the fore port corner an EPS high-frequency step-up supply. To the aft was a small console on the rear wall beside another door.

Anna thought, *This is a very weird mish-mash of stuff in here.*

But her pondering about the room was interrupted by Andrea saying, “She’s got a cousin who’s a nun.”

Anna shook her head in astonishment. “A nun? A real nun?”

“Yep,” Andrea confirmed. “An order that goes around helping with the hard work of colonies that have had a rough start.”

“Wow! That’s amazing! Is she like Maria?”

Aisling snorted. “Half of them are Marias, but no, my cousin is still just Betty.”

“I mean like Maria von Trapp.”

“Like *The Sound of Music*? Oh hell no, Betty would be kicked off-world if she ever tried to sing in public.”

Anna stopped short and began wringing her fingers again. “They...they can do that?”

“Who can do what?” Aisling asked as she went through the aft door into the next room.

Andrea went in as well, so Anna followed her, still scanning around. This room was similar to the last but much smaller, with only one quarters to the port and one magnetic fractionator to the starboard. In the middle was a small table and four chairs.

“Replicator’s there,” Aisling said, pointing to the small unit on the aft wall. “Get whatever you want. I’ll go fetch Mack from her bay.”

As Aisling left, Anna asked Andrea, “Can you really be thrown off a planet if you sing badly?”

Tyler laughed. “No, of course not.” But then she shrugged and added, “Then again, I’ve heard of people getting kicked out of some of the weirder colonies for all sorts of things, so who knows?” She approached the replicator and said, “Computer, Bargesian salad and a turkey club sandwich, plus apple juice.” As it got to work she turned back to Anna. “Aisling will tell you tons of stories about her extended family if you want. Like, for hours,” she said in a warning tone.

As much as Anna loved to hear people tell her their family stories, she couldn’t help but worry about the possibility of being ejected from anywhere for bad singing. *I really hope all of Data’s compliments about my singing were true and that he won’t let that happen to me.* Despite the abundant warmth coming off of the machinery in the room, she shuddered.



Stardate 47242.5 (Monday 30/03/2370 12:38) — Main  
Engineering

Geordi glanced up from his console as he saw Data enter and approach. “Hey Data.”

“Hello Geordi.”

“I’m just finishing up prep for when we get to the station tonight.”

“Have you assigned tasks for the night shift?”

“Only a couple, by request. We’re going to be there long enough that I didn’t feel the need to rush much. I’ve got everything that needs doing before we get there assigned out, though.” He stood and leaned closer to Data, which prompted Data to lean closer to him. “Did Riker talk to you about this mining thing?”

Data’s brow went up. “No. The captain did.”

“Weird, huh?”

Data put on his deliberately-curious expression as if he was portraying Sherlock on the holodeck. “The more experiences I have in Starfleet, the fewer seem weird by comparison.”

Geordi laughed loudly. “That’s about right!” He lowered his voice again and said, “Still, I guess we keep our ears to the ground.”

Data’s brow furrowed.

Geordi quickly began to clarify, “Data, it’s a —”

“A metaphor. Yes,” Data replied with a nod and return to brow-neutral position. “I understand. I will create more memory recordings than usual of our interactions at the station, should they be required for later review.”

“Don’t overload yourself about it, though.”

“I will not.”

“It’s probably some wild goose chase.”

“It would not be appropriate to have wild geese loose on board.”

“Data, that’s a metaphor too.”

“I know. I was making a joke.”

They stared at each other for a moment, and then Geordi burst into more laughter.

Data smiled. “It was funny, then?”

Geordi patted him on the shoulder. “Yeah, Data, I’ll give you that one. But keep the puns away from me, please.”

Data nodded. “I have a more receptive audience for the puns now.”

“Yeah, I know,” Geordi said with a wide grin. “You keep telling her those jokes...but not in here! Spare me, please!”



Stardate 47242.5 (Monday 30/03/2370 12:40) — Deck Thirty-Nine  
— Room 5418

When Aisling returned with Mack in tow, Andrea was already eating her lunch at the little table. Anna sat opposite Andrea but without any food, twisting her fingers nervously beneath the table's edge.

“Okay, Anna White, this is Melissa Mackenzie, but everyone calls her Mack.”

Anna nodded quickly at the very tall woman with short, spiky hair and a pink scar running from the left edge of her forehead down past her eye to her cheekbone. “Yes, hello,” Anna said. “We met once. I had to replicate some Jeffrey's tube floor tiles to test my slides on.”

“Right, but I wasn't sure if you two spoke then,” Aisling said.

“A little,” Anna said. “I really like your sorting system in there. But...oh...is that a weird thing to say?”

Mack smiled and blushed a little. She also un-criinged, rising to her full, enormous height with her extremely broad shoulders out proudly.

“That was about the most perfect thing you could say,” Aisling replied kindly. She patted Mack on the shoulder gently and said, “Come on then. Get lunch.”

Mack nodded and went to the replicator, where she began pushing buttons.

Aisling said, “I know it's hard for both of you with new people, but you're in excellent company and I'm sure you're going to be very good friends. We're all going to be gentle and understanding

with each other so there's nothing to worry about, even if you do say something weird."

Mack sat down on the door side of the table with a tray of steak, roast potatoes, and steamed broccoli.

Aisling ordered tomato and butternut squash gnocchi with a small side salad. As she joined them at the table she said, "Anna I know eating with others is still tricky for you so you don't have to, but this is as safe a space as any to try it. Nobody comes in here unless the contingency rooms are needed, which is pretty much only if there's some kind of massive damage to the saucer section or more likely if we take on a pile of refugees from another ship or something. Situations where we wouldn't be having casual lunch anyway. That's why we eat in here: nobody comes in to bug us."

Andrea added, "No men allowed. Safe space for anything we need to talk about."

Anna took a deep breath and relaxed a little.

"Which means we can talk about them, if anybody needs to," Aisling added as she stood again to return to the replicator and press some buttons.

Andrea giggled softly.

Aisling set a plate of warm chocolate cookies on the table, mostly central but a little closer to Anna than anyone else. As she sat back down she said, "You're an adult now, you know. You can eat dessert before lunch if you want. Those are for everyone at this table, no conditions. No food shaming here, ever."

Anna's eyes bulged towards the cookies. "Gosh. I've never seen those in the replicator menu before."

Aisling explained, "Mhm, they're a bit of a secret because the word chocolate doesn't appear in the name. You have to know to search or ask for 'double fudgers'."

"Double fudgers?" Anna repeated reverentially.

Andrea said, "It's someone's legacy recipe."

"Oh!" Anna exclaimed. "Like the steamed bananas!"

Aisling nearly choked on her gnocchi. She put her hand over her mouth and said, "Holy hell, I should hope not!"

Anna reached out and picked up a cookie with both hands, slowly bringing towards herself, staring at it but then looking at the other three women in turn.

“Anna, just eat the cookie,” Aisling implored. “I put them there specifically to tempt you into eating with us. Let me blatantly manipulate you into some joy.”

Anna sat up and wiggled her shoulders as if preparing for a monumental undertaking. She drew in a deep breath, then took a large bite. As she chewed it, her shoulders slumped, her head tilted, and her eyes rolled back. “Mmm,” she moaned loudly. “That is so good!”

“I know,” Aisling said with a victorious little grin. “Eat as many as you want. Same nutritional value as anything else out of a Starfleet replicator. Maybe one day I’ll take you to a bakery I know near the Academy campus that makes real ones. Or I’ll take you to the ancestral Kelly lands so you can have the full clan experience.”

Anna smiled wistfully as she took another bite. “I had the biggest childhood crush on him. Gene Kelly, I mean. If I had a religion, it’d be rainbows and butterflies and Gene Kelly, all floating in the sunny sky.”

“And chocolate cookies?” Andrea asked.

“Mm, yes,” Anna said with another bite stuffing her mouth. She gulped it down, then held the remaining portion aloft. “These are my religion’s sacred food now.” She giggled. “I used to daydream he’d come rescue me, riding on a magical, rainbow cloud. He’d pick me up and dance me up into the sky, all the way home. He’d never be scary or mean like real men, just kind and singing and...” She trailed off into a happy sigh, then took another bite of the cookie.

Aisling said, “That’s a really sweet fantasy dream.”

Anna finished the cookie. “When I was little, I thought you could become people when you grew up. Like actual other people, and other characters from stories and movies. So I liked to imagine that when I grew up I’d become Judy Garland and marry Gene Kelly while wearing Maria’s wedding dress with the train that goes

down the whole length of the abbey. And then at the reception after I'd wear that pink ballgown that Anna from *The King and I* wears and we'd dance around the room and everybody who saw me would love me and nobody..." Her expression faltered and she slumped forward a little.

"And nobody would abandon you ever again?" Aisling asked quietly.

Anna nodded.

"Hey," Aisling said, tapping the table in front of Anna so she'd look up at her. "We all love you and we're not abandoning you."

Anna nodded unconvincingly.

"Anna, I promise. You're not alone anymore, okay?"

Anna nodded again with a forced little smile.

Aisling scraped together the remaining gnocchi on her plate. "That said, we do need to leave this lunch date soon and head up to the cargo processing bays on Deck Thirty-Seven." She turned to Mack to ask, "Did Geordi already send you everything?"

Mack nodded.

"Good. Finish up, ladies. We can get more cookies later."

Andrea reached forward to grab one with an encouraging grin towards Anna, who smiled in return and picked up another herself. They bit them in synch and giggled at each other about it.

# CHAPTER SIX

Stardate 47242.6 (Monday 30/03/2370 13:00) — Deck Thirty-Seven — Cargo Bays

After lunch, Anna, Aisling, Andrea, and Mack all went up to the cargo processing bays at the rear of Deck Thirty-Seven to organise and prepare the rooms for incoming items from the station, beginning in a central room with no external hatch.

Mack had a PADD with a list of some expected items, so she set about preparing those areas as per her usual routines.

Aisling unlocked and opened the door to the next cargo bay towards port, and then walked through to the door opposite that and opened that as well, creating a wide inner corridor between the three.

She came back to Anna and quietly said, “I heard you aren’t keen on airlocks so if you want to stay away from the corner rooms with the hatches to the outside —”

“Those are okay. Airlocks are...different,” Anna said uncomfortably. “Did Data tell you that?”

“Nope. Geordi.”

Anna twisted her mouth to the side, looking perturbed.

“Why, did you only tell Data?”

Anna nodded.

“Okay, if he told Geordi, that was to make sure Geordi took care of you about it, and Geordi told me so I could take care of you too. We all just want to keep you happy and safe, I promise. You don’t have to talk about it, I’m just giving you options.”

Anna shrugged but nodded a little. Then she shook it off and said, “I mean, I guess I’m happier away from big cargo bay doors too. I just...it’s different.”

“Then stay in these two rooms. It’s fine. Everything’s fine,” Aisling gently said. She offered a PADD. “Here’s a list of the stuff

we don't know for sure that we're getting, but usually end up with, and the shelf configurations that go with those. The shelves all have auto-guides on them, so all you need to do is tell them on their controls where to go, using the co-ordinates here, and if you put in these codes," she said pointing to a list on the PADD. "They'll auto-adjust their shelf height too."

Anna nodded. "Seems easy."

"It is. But it's one of those things we do manually with me checking it all off as security so the rooms are certified for loading."

"Yeah, I was just thinking I could write a program to do it all."

"Many have. It always ends up with some issue somewhere. So we do it this way, stuff gets loaded in, sorted, put in place, everything organised, everything secure."

"Got it," Anna said.

Andrea was already directing shelves on the other side of the room. She said, "It's why we grab it as a task, because it's easy enough for us to chat while we work. Once the stuff comes in, then we have to pay attention more."

"Exactly," Aisling said with a grin. "So...Anna...you're looking for a man who can dance?"

Anna blinked in confusion.

"Like Gene Kelly?" Aisling clarified. "Because I happen to know of one who learned to dance so he could honour his friend's traditions at her wedding. To another man," she hastily added. "The dancing man is single. Very single."

Anna remained confused, but set about coding the shelving unit beside her.

Andrea dreamily pondered, "I wonder if Commander La Forge dances. I bet he does. I bet he's amazing at it." She sighed happily.

Anna set her confused expression on Andrea, then looked back to Aisling. She shook her head and said, "I don't understand any of this."

"What, Andrea's crush on Geordi?" Aisling asked. "What's to understand, other than a silly but adorable young ensign enthralled

by a man of intelligence, wisdom, power, and particularly nice hands.”

Andrea fanned her face with her PADD. “Oh! His hands!”

Aisling laughed softly.

But Anna wasn’t amused. She entered the shelf’s location code and stepped out of its way as it slowly began to move towards the middle of the room. “I mean...any of it. This whole subject. I mean...oh never mind, ignore me.”

“I’ll do no such thing,” Aisling said as she tapped her PADD. “If you’re confused, we’re here to help you.”

Frustrated, Anna grumbled, “I don’t even have the right words to understand enough to ask about what I don’t understand, or what’s okay to talk about or not.”

“Anna, that’s not unusual.”

“It isn’t?”

“Of course not, especially for someone who’s been all alone like you. You do understand the basic reproductive —”

“Ew, yes, I know how that works. I know what sex is and how lots of different bodies can do different things together and make babies or not or whatever. I did the standard sex ed courses the Baltimore computer pushed at me,” she grumbled further, squirming uncomfortably.

“And do you know it’s also okay and normal to not be into any of it?”

“You mean asexuality.”

“Yes. Totally normal and okay.”

“Yeah, I know that too. My computer listed it all out for me. Lots of options. Too many options. Too much...stuff and things and entanglements and it’s all so...” She pulled a face and shuddered.

Mack, who had entered the room to stick a set of labels on a shelf in the far corner, nodded.

Aisling calmly said, “It’s okay. We’re not pushing you or judging you. Anna you’re only, what, twenty-four? Twenty-five? Lots of people question their sexuality at your age, or even older,

or even all their lives. It's okay to be questioning. Don't let anyone tell you that you have to pick a team and stick to it forever."

Anna sighed and set more codes as the shelf unit came to a stop, causing it to move its shelves up and down into position. "I guess...I don't understand how anybody can pick someone else and know, 'There, that one, I like that one.'"

"That's never happened to you?" Aisling asked.

Anna shook her head. "No."

"Well again, that's not unusual, especially for someone who's hardly met that many people."

Anna muttered, "All I know for sure is...it's not...human men." She pulled another face.

Aisling smiled and tapped her PADD again as Andrea's shelf unit reached its position. "Trust me, a lot of us who are biologically attracted to human men are also revolted by them. It's how we know sexuality isn't a choice."

Anna wrinkled her nose. "They smell bad, and have too much hair all over, and they're so...lust. And angry. And angry about their lust."

"Mhm," Aisling said. "Human male sexual aggression can be a pretty big turnoff."

Andrea said, "Commander La Forge isn't like that."

Aisling replied, "Generally not, but even he's had his...moments that went too far."

Andrea looked utterly baffled. "What?"

Aisling waved her hand dismissively. "Never mind, it's all been settled and apologised for. My point is, there are too many men like that who don't apologise and do better, and it can be hard to find one that isn't. Kajus is a soft little kitty cat of sweetness when it comes to the bedroom, but because of all he's been through he has an aggressive outer shell that's really of-putting. Sometimes when I see him being gruff with others I think, 'Who the hell is that guy and why would I ever want him?'" She pulled her own overly exaggerated face of disgust, but then she sighed and

shrugged. “Then again, sometimes the heart wants what it wants even if it’s not what you think you’d want.”

“I don’t even know what I think I want,” Anna protested. “I just know that all human men — every one of them, aggressive or not — they all smell like...” She gulped away a gag, shuddered again, and whispered, “Violence and pain.”

Aisling automatically started raising her arms to go hug Anna, but then stopped herself, standing helplessly in the middle of the room, respecting Anna’s no-hugs rule.

From behind her, Mack quietly said, “Yeah.”

The other three turned to look at Mack, which made her stare at her feet.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment, but then Aisling punctured it away by carefully, gently saying, “That makes total sense for what you two have been through.”

Anna said, “Yeah but even before...Loxos. It’s all...” She gagged, pushed her PADD onto the nearest shelf, and gripped it.

“Hey hey, okay, you’re okay now,” Aisling said, rushing over to Anna while holding her arms awkwardly at her sides, still unable to offer a hug. “We don’t have to talk about any of that horrible stuff. Human men: off the table. That’s fine. That’s an entirely reasonable boundary for yourself.”

“It is?” Anna asked plaintively.

“Of course!”

“It feels...unfair. Like I’m being mean to people I’ve never met. Dr. Mcleod said it’s unscientific bigotry to hate all men.”

Aisling scoffed and crossed her arms. “She sounds like an ass. You don’t hate all men. You have men who are friends, including human ones. Anna, attraction can’t be forced. That’s actual science. So if someone in the demographic you’re not into whines about it, that’s their problem, not yours. You think lesbians sit around feeling sorry for the men they’re not attracted to? Not hardly.”

“No, we don’t,” Mack declared firmly in her New Zealand-like accent from her Turkana IV faction.

Again, all heads turned to Mack, but this time she kept her head up high.

Aisling smiled at her warmly. "Of course you don't."

Andrea suggested, "Anna, maybe you're attracted to women? Or non-binary people who don't smell like human men?"

Anna shrugged. "I don't know. I'm...I'm not sure. I've never really thought about...I mean, I don't really get how things all...fit. Sort of. Beyond what the sex ed lessons said."

Andrea grinned. "I'm sure the right lady would show you how."

Anna exclaimed, "Jiminy Crickets!"

Aisling and Andrea laughed. Aisling noticed a flash of a hopeful smile on Mack's face, and had to hide a cringe of worry. *Oh no, no no no, my dear Mack, you're both sweethearts but you'd make a terrible couple. Neither of you is equipped for what the other needs. And besides, I've already seen how Anna looks at a particular non-human man*, Aisling thought.

As if reading Aisling's mind, Andrea asked, "What about non-human men?"

Anna blinked and tilted her head in consideration. "Well...I suppose...when you put it that way...hm." She twisted her mouth, then said, "Worf doesn't smell bad at all, not even after he's been doing his training stuff." She hurriedly added, "Not that I'm attracted to Worf. He's kind and I think of him as a friend but...okay, theoretically, there could be non-human men, I guess. And theoretically there could be women, but none of either group has ever caught my eye. Or anyone, really."

Aisling noted Mack's visible disappointment and decided to have a private chat with her later about it.

Andrea asked, "So you've never felt attracted to anyone ever?"

Anna shrugged sheepishly. "I don't know. I don't know how to tell. There've been a few times I look at a particular situation and I get that funny feeling all through my body, like butterflies and tickles and it makes me think about...you know...sexy stuff," she said awkwardly. "But it's not like I'm sexually attracted to that

situation. It's like...a chain reaction, or something. That's why I'm confused."

Aisling said, "Okay, then let us help you sort it out." She beckoned the other two closer and moved some empty crates together as seats in the middle of the room. As everyone sat she said, "Tell us about one of these situations and we'll help you and not giggle or tease or be shocked or anything, will we?"

Andrea and Mack shook their heads solemnly.

Anna sighed and looked down at her twisting fingers. But then a little smile appeared and she softly said, "The 'Singin' in the Rain' song and dance."

Aisling grinned. "We're back to Gene Kelly."

Anna nodded and closed her eyes as her shoulders swayed to the imagined music. "Watching him move like that, leap around like that, his body, his voice, his smile the way he sings about being in love, going up the lamppost, twirling at the end through the puddles with the umbrella..." She trailed off with a dreamy sigh.

"Well, you're definitely not alone in finding that sexy," Aisling said.

Anna snapped out of her reverie with another face of disgust. "No, see, it's not direct like that. I don't look at that and think, 'I want to make love with Gene Kelly.' It's never been like that. It's just that watching that scene, I get all the tingles and butterflies."

"Okay. Can you describe another one so we can find the similarities?"

Anna suddenly cringed guiltily.

"Anna, nobody's judging you. This biological stuff, we often can't control it."

Anna quietly said, "In *Frozen*, when Elsa changes at the end of 'Let it Go,' when her hair comes down and..." Once again Anna smiled. "Her arms go out and her dress changes, and she walks differently through those doors and you know she's not putting up with anything that kept her down anymore. The way she moves: her hips, the swaying, the freedom of it all...that gives me the same

all over tingle, right up to my lips,” she said, touching them reverentially with her fingertips briefly before putting both hands on the sides of her face. “That song makes my whole body light up, but even just thinking about that scene without belting out the notes of it makes my lips tingle so much they itch, or even hurt.” She bit down on her lip in emphasis.

“So it’s the song too?”

Anna nodded emphatically. “Yes! All of it!”

“And it’s also the music in the other one?” Andrea asked.

“I guess, yeah, but...all of it together, the whole mood, the whole scene. When they sing the same tunes elsewhere in the movies in a jaunty, silly way, it doesn’t do anything.”

“Maybe it’s the freedom, like you said,” Andrea suggested. “Maybe you’re attracted to people who are unrestrained.”

Anna’s brow furrowed. “Maybe. But...no. Not exactly. Because it’s Elsa in *Frozen Two* too, these fleeting moments in other scenes where she’s...confident, I guess? But also...part of something.”

“Feeling like you belong is really important to a healthy, loving relationship,” Aisling suggested.

Anna shrugged and dropped her hands to her lap. “I s’pose.”

“Okay, tell us another musical scene that makes you feel like this. If you want,” Aisling said.

Anna groaned a little. “See...it’s not just the music. It’s....something more. The music is a symbol of it, but not...it’s not the actual thing? Because there’s this other time I saw...” She shook her head. “It’s ridiculous. It makes no sense, and it’s putting things onto other people in ways that I don’t think are appropriate.”

“You mean like objectifying someone?”

“No, more like...getting the tingle when there’s no context for feeling that sort of thing at all.”

“Well, again, biology sometimes kicks in without our permission,” Aisling explained. “As long as you’re not foisting it on someone or a given situation, it’s still natural to have reactions to things that make you feel good.”

Anna looked at them each in turn, sighed, twisted her fingers again, and said, “When I was all alone, sometimes I put on video recordings from conferences — speeches and such — so I could pretend I was there and listening and part of the group.” She suddenly scowled and grumbled, “Which is why it’s so pathetic that it turned out I actually am terrified being in a conference like that in person, because I always thought I wanted to be.”

“Big groups of people can be a lot scarier than we think they’re going to be,” Andrea sympathised.

Anna sighed and nodded. “I happened across some video from the 2349 Annual Philosophy of Science Conference on Vulcan. The speeches were fine, the debates were interesting at times, but also a lot of boring stuff. But there’s this moment...”

She stared into the distance for a moment and then continued, “It’s not even really part of the proceedings. It’s in between, when the panel is changing over to the next group. And from the left of the screen, there’s this Vulcan man and a Klingon man — I can’t remember their names...but how they looked, it’s burned in my mind forever.

“They’re gorgeous, both of them, in these...just...magnificent robes; the Vulcan man sparkles like a rainbow and the Klingon man sparkles like the gold dust blowing across the blue Covaris Two sky. They walk in side by side, shoulder to shoulder, both looking forward, and they’re talking and nodding, and we can’t hear in the video any of what they’re saying, but they’re clearly having some kind of civil, maybe even pleasant conversation? And the room just....”

Anna made a slow, wide parting motion with her hands, her fingers wiggling a little to symbolise all the people drifting to the side. “It’s like they have a static warp bubble around them, or some kind of powerful force, something that makes everyone bow their heads and move away.”

Awestruck, Andrea whispered, “Power. And majesty.”

Anna nodded, still staring into the distance at her recollection. “Yeah but...they don’t even notice. They’re too busy talking. They

walk in there and they immediately own that room, and everyone else there knows it except for them. There's this aura of..." She wrinkled her nose a little. "It's not just power or majesty. It's something beyond that. Something magical. Like Elsa when she knows she's made her palace the way she needs it to be. Like Gene Kelly stomping through puddles and not caring what the policeman thinks. I used to watch those men entering that room over and over to try to figure it out. Their robes are beautiful and their hair is amazing and their presence is powerful but it's not...it's something else..."

Mack said, "Not the power, but the safety and security the power brings." The other three all turned to her. She continued, "Knowing nobody in that room would dare hurt 'em or make 'em feel unsafe or unwelcome. They belonged and knew it to the point of not even thinking to question it. And the idea of being that safe, that secure, that right'n'proper where you are, lifting all the junk away so you can feel like the real you. And being who you are is the biggest, best feeling in the universe. It's sexy but beyond sexy."

Anna nodded and whispered, "It's being whole."

Mack nodded back. "Yep. Whole."

"Wow," Anna breathed.

Mack said, "Yep."

Aisling and Andrea looked at each other wide-eyed, having never heard Mack say so many words at one time ever before.

Anna said in an uncertain tone, "I want...that."

Mack nodded again.

More firmly, Anna declared, "I want someone who makes me feel like that all the time."

Mack said, "Someone who makes you feel like you've won the match without having to go into the ring in the first place."

"Yeah," Anna agreed. "Completely safe. And warm. And..." She looked down at her hands.

"Loved," Aisling suggested.

"Who'll never let you down," Mack said.

Andrea sighed sadly. "And wants you like you want them."

Aisling leaned across to pat Andrea's hand gently, and Andrea smiled resolutely back.

Anna added, "And will never suddenly get angry at you, or make you cry or scared, not even if you mess up."

Mack muttered, "Wants you for you who are even if you're a cock-up mess."

Anna chuckled wryly. "Is that that whole 'you have to love yourself first' thing? Because that always seems like an unfair demand."

Aisling said, "Phrased like that, it is an unfair demand. It's more that it's easier to form a stable relationship when everyone in the relationship knows themselves enough to know what baggage they're bringing in, so all parties can be honest and open about expectations."

"Oh golly," Anna said. "I think I might have a lot of baggage."

"We all do, of one sort or another," Aisling said. "But that's why we have conversations like this, so all of us can figure out who we are and what we want and need before experimenting it out on someone else. It's not about being in a perfect, stable place before you're allowed to seek love, it's about knowing what your needs are and finding someone who knows their needs too, and then being able to match up what you can give each other."

"That sounds wonderful," Andrea said wistfully.

"It is," Aisling replied. "That's what love and marriage really are. The sex is just icing on the cake."

Anna wrinkled her nose in disgust again. "I don't think I'm anywhere near ready for that kind of icing."

Aisling smiled at her. "And that's okay too."



It took a significant amount of pacing about his quarters, poking through his book collection, a small lunch he barely even noticed himself eating, and then finally returning to the issues T'Char had presented to successfully distract Picard's mind away from the subject of Anna.

*Magnesite*, he thought. *What subterfuge could possibly involve magnesite?*

He idly researched the material on his terminal and confirmed — as T'Char had said — it was barely a step above dirt. Historically it had some useful properties — either by extracting magnesium out of it or burning it hot enough to create various heat-resistant substances — but most of those applications had since been superseded by other materials. Because it was highly porous and could hold dye well, it was often used in jewellery and other artistic forms.

*I'm reasonably certain the Tal Shiar is not interested in colourful beads*, he thought with a brief smirk.

Picard leaned back in his chair, rubbing at his chin, pondering if he was stuck thinking too much within his familiar level of technology. *What if someone's using it in those old-fashioned ways? Building what...a blast furnace? For what purpose? To make or refine something else, perhaps? Or perhaps people without the means to make more advanced materials using it in simple ways because that's all they have?*

These thoughts directed him to memories of growing up in La Barre and the surrounding villages, and how people there often used ancient methodologies to reuse all sorts of things, taking great satisfaction in fixing up that which was old and making it function once more.

*Humans did a poor job of recycling prior to World War Three*, he recalled from his school lessons. *It was a noble notion at the time but they didn't make enough use out of what was recycled to make it a viable solution to pollution and waste issues, especially in the context of everything having to be profitable.*

Picard wrinkled his nose briefly in disgust at the concept of profit-driven economies, having no idea that several decks below, Anna was pulling the exact same face repeatedly in discussions of romance.

*It took an enormous amount of power and created yet more pollution to recycle some materials, so even where profit could be eked out it remained a flawed system. Yet it was that well-intentioned start that resulted in the discoveries necessary to lead to early forms of replication, he recalled.*

*Which is exactly why we don't replicate magnesite now. It wouldn't make sense. If someone needs it for some reason, they would indeed mine it because the energy and particulate solution needed to replicate it exceeds the resources required to dig some out of the ground. Rather like how it's still more efficient to use enhanced composting for soil improvement than replicating good soil, other than perhaps at the very start of a terraforming project.*

*That's why everyone in La Barre had their own composting systems. It wasn't just my father who was against replicators; hardly any of my friends had them at home either. There was a town one in Beaumotte-Aubertans just up the road so nobody went without necessities but we all composted and repurposed everyday items. It was a matter of household pride.*

He smiled at the memory of joining Robert to haul cartloads of that which could not be repurposed at home up to the small dematerialisation facility behind the Beaumotte-Aubertans Mairie — or city hall — which processed pretty much anything into replicator solution. It was fun to send things down the long chute to the underground processor and hear them thunk or shatter down there. He had always enjoyed imagining what treasures might have been sacrificed so that everyone in town could have equal access to the sorts of items that were too difficult or dangerous to make by hand: old, broken tools magically transformed into new ones, desiccated building materials renewed via technology into strong, durable things no artisan in the villages wanted to churn out en masse.

Most of the people he knew considered hand-grown, hand-harvested, and hand-prepared food and drink to be vastly superior to replicated, and in some cases he had to admit that they were probably right. Where Jean-Luc's preferences drifted from his father and other townsfolk was when it came to textiles, furnishings, and other necessities. He appreciated those things made as artisanal hobbies, but recognised that as a facet of the privilege afforded to Earth by replicators.

*It's all well and good for people to spend days weaving and sewing a gorgeous garment when there's time for that specifically because nobody is going unclothed. It's all well and good to spend weeks hand-carving a magnificent wooden bed frame when nobody is going without a bed at all, or a roof for that matter. Father never truly understood the inherent privilege of being able to operate in old-fashioned ways when it was modern technology that made up any shortfall, kept the lights on, and maintained the weather in a reliable state. It's easy to live in a world of luxurious, handcrafted hobbies when technology holds the whole thing aloft.*

He chuckled; his recent sessions with Deanna forcing him to consider what his father would say or do in various situations made him instantly realise how furious the man would have been to have had his winemaking career described as a "hobby".

He waved his hand in the air idly to banish thoughts of his angry father, enjoying instead the more pleasant memories of rural French community life.

A face popped into his mind, and he leaned his head back against his chair to close his eyes and conjure it up more clearly. *Ah yes, Marguerite Plamondon. Good lord, she was lovely.*

There was a tiny, gold-coloured cottage between the Mairie and the Beaumotte-Aubertans church, all of them historic buildings that had been preserved over centuries. The Plamondons lived in the cottage, so Marguerite could often be found hanging around the processing chutes behind the Mairie where she would engage in another crucial village pastime: gossip. She saw who came and

went, what sort of things they brought, and was effortlessly chatty with all and sundry.

Young Jean-Luc, by contrast, always found himself tongue-tied when she spoke to him, because she was so overwhelmingly beautiful. Nobody in the area was religious anymore in any meaningful way, but the historically preserved churches still held old French Catholic artworks. He always imagined that Marguerite — with her long, blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes — was an angel that had stepped out of one of the windows, paintings, or statues.

She would stand over him as he fed items into the chute, peering into the darkness with him, that magnificent hair sweeping over his arm and driving him to distraction.

Marguerite Plamondon was — as far as young Jean-Luc Picard was concerned — the best reason to recycle items and feed the town replicator.

He met up again with her during his late cadet years when he was serving a six-month tour at Federation Headquarters in Paris. She was there studying at one of the universities, but he could not recall what subject. She told him then that she'd always looked forward to him coming to the Mairie in particular. He hadn't been sure he believed her, but it soon didn't matter as they fell into a brief but torrid love affair during which he learned a great deal, including how alluring long hair brushing over one's entire naked body could be.

Something in the back of his mind nagged him to get back to considering the magnesite and mining issue, but memories of Marguerite won out, distracting him fully from any other thoughts for some time.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

Stardate 47242.8 (Monday 30/03/2370 14:35) — Deck Thirty-Seven — Cargo Bays

The four friends continued to chat as they wrapped up work in the cargo bays, though about lighter topics for some time after Anna's angst and Mack's brief burst of verbosity.

Andrea checked for any updates on one of the wall consoles and then sighed dreamily. "I wish I could be a console under his hands. Doesn't that sound wonderful?"

Anna blinked in confusion, but when she realised what Andrea meant her eyes went wide. "Uh, no? I can't say I want that at all. But...I'm glad you find some joy in the idea?" She grinned awkwardly at Andrea, but then turned to Aisling to wince and shrug.

Aisling chuckled softly.

Mack rolled her eyes and kept working.

Andrea continued musing, "Sometimes when I'm working, I pay extra attention to which LCARS menus I tap the most and think about where I'd want that function on my body."

"Sweet Jesus," Aisling muttered, shaking her head.

Andrea leaned back against the wall, hugging her PADD to her chest, and said, "And you know how with the transporter control you slide two fingers up together —"

"Okay! That's...wow, we love that you're sharing with us!" Aisling interjected while Anna looked baffled and Mack snorted. "Andrea, we all support your...vivid fantasies and wish that someday you'll find someone to...uh...transport you to another realm of..."

"Pleasurable indulgences?" Andrea suggested with a coy little giggle.

“Yes, that,” Aisling said carefully. “I hope you find that. But like I’ve already told you, you need to pick someone more...interested.”

Andrea sighed again, this time resolutely, letting her arms drop to her sides. “I know he doesn’t feel the same. I get it.” Then she lifted her chin and defiantly added, “But until he says so himself, I’m going to keep dreaming! I can’t help it.” She smiled again. “He’s so dreamy.”

“Yeah, and he might well pop in here at any point so be careful what you’re broadcasting in a cargo bay.”

“Gosh, do we really have to be careful what we say in here?” Anna asked. “After the stuff we talked about earlier?”

Aisling replied, “Not really. I just mean...if you’re going to graphically describe how you’re lusting for your supervisor, that should be kept in a bit more control. In a general sense. We’d know if he or anyone else was coming in, don’t worry. We’d hear the doors.”

Anna nodded but continued to look concerned.

Aisling said, “Anna, it’s fine. We can talk in here. Just not so blatantly about where fingers go, you know?”

Mack chuckled quietly.

Andrea giggled again and whispered, “Beam me up, Geordi,” while making a transporter sliding motion with her hand. When Aisling shot her a dire look, she laughed loudly, but hid her face behind her PADD.

Aisling shook her head and then said to Anna, “Please, if you have any topic to distract us, save us all now.”

Anna shrugged and then went to sit on one of the crate piles again. “I was just thinking that, seeing as it’s only us in here and you’re all so nice to me...” She took a deep breath, sat up tall and straight, and then declared, “Go ahead and ask me anything you like.” But then she immediately shrank back and quickly clarified, “Wait, no, not anything. Don’t ask me about Loxos or what he did, and don’t ask me about how I cut my leg off because I don’t

remember anyway and trying to remember always gives me nightmares about crashing and —”

“Hey, hey, Anna,” Aisling said as she also resumed sitting on some crates. “You don’t have to tell us anything about anything unless you want to.”

Anna nodded. “I know. But I want to. Mostly. Sometimes I think it’d be easier to be around other people if I didn’t have to worry so much about what they know or not. Sometimes I get all wrapped up in thinking what they’re wondering about me, so if I tell you three some stuff, I won’t feel so weird? I think?”

“Okay, we all want to be here for you and hear you out,” Aisling said. “And yeah, we’re normal humans with curiosities, but none of us want you to upset yourself. How about this: you’ve opened the floor to questions and that’s great, but we all agree that you get to pass on any part of any answer for any reason. Even if you start answering, you get to stop.” She looked at Andrea pointedly as the latter sat down with them. “Right?”

Andrea nodded eagerly. “Oh! Of course! I hate upsetting anybody!”

Aisling turned to Anna again, who said, “Yeah. I like that plan.”

Mack slowly shuffled over to join them as well.

Aisling added, “Also, a disclaimer that none of us have therapy training.”

Anna wrinkled her nose in disgust. “If you did, I wouldn’t even be in this room with you.”

Aisling groaned in embarrassment. “Right. Yeah, I guess not. Sorry.”

Andrea suddenly interjected, “Does your leg hurt? Because sometimes you limp and sometimes you don’t and when you do I want to offer help but I’m not sure if that’s okay or not.”

Anna smiled warmly at her. “That’s actually a really kind way to ask about that. Um, it doesn’t hurt in the way a lot of people think, that phantom-pain thing. I don’t get that and I don’t remember ever getting it. But yeah, wearing the prosthetic too long can irritate my residual limb, although sometimes I limp because

I'm still not used to walking with it. Which is partly my fault for rejecting the physical therapy they offered me after I escaped The Institute. So the limping doesn't always mean I'm in pain and even when it does hurt, you can't really help much. If it got bad enough, I'd just take off the leg and hop around like I'm used to doing."

Aisling asked, "Doesn't that hurt your hips and back?"

Anna shrugged. "Sometimes, if I don't have enough things to lean on or grab. I prefer to move around by arms and the one foot, but the spaces you're all used to don't accommodate that for me so I have to use the prosthetic to get by. Thank you for not telling me to just get a bio limb, though," she added with a smile.

"Who do I look like, Dean Covett?" Aisling scoffed. "You've made that very clear that you don't want that."

"I don't, any more than any of you want a new appendage sewn onto your body, like I said to him that first day."

"And we totally respect that," Aisling said. "Unlike Dean, who appears to have turned it into a reason to hate you because he's an asshole."

They all laughed a little.

Andrea asked, "Weren't you scared all the time, being a little kid all alone on a whole planet with nobody else, and in a crashed ship?"

"Um..." Anna said, turning away for a moment.

"You don't have to answer that," Aisling reminded her.

Anna sighed. "No, it's okay. I was, at first but then...I don't know, I got used to life like that. I had replicators and life support, so even when there were still holes in the hull it was liveable. I was a kid. Kids adapt. You learn to get by and find fun in some things, and after awhile when nothing new bad happens..." She shrugged again. "You just...get on with life, really."

"So...did you play?" Andrea asked.

"Of course I did," Anna replied with a little laugh. "And I ate too much candy and ice cream, once I learned how to bypass the parent locks on the replicators."

Aisling groaned. "Please don't teach Aoife to do that."

“It’s not that hard. She’ll figure it out on her own,” Anna said helpfully, but Aisling groaned again.

“I figured it out,” Andrea said with a little guilty smile.

“Yeah okay, so did I,” Aisling admitted.

Mack softly asked, “Did you always know you’d get out?”

Anna shook her head. “No. I knew I wanted to. I was driven to. But no, I didn’t know if I would. I didn’t know how many years it would take, or if someone would find me first. And even when I launched, part of me thought I might just explode and die. I kind of expected to, in a way. But I had to try. I couldn’t stay there.”

Mack nodded very solemnly in understanding.

Aisling looked at Mack with great sympathy, but before she could check that Mack was okay, Andrea blurted, “What about your father? He wasn’t on the ship. Is he dead too?”

“Nope,” Anna said coldly. “He’s quite alive.”

Aisling was about to gesture to Andrea to not ask such blunt things, but instead suddenly turned to Anna to say, “Wait, what? You know who he is and that he’s alive?”

“Yep, and yep.” Anna replied with a dark expression.

Aisling suppressed a shudder. “But...all the holonews coverage said your father is ‘unknown’.”

Anna picked at her pant leg idly, staring daggers down towards the ground. “Yeah. Because he told my mother he wanted nothing do with either of us so I’ve never named him because I don’t want the drama.”

Aisling winced. Mack nodded slowly in understanding.

Andrea gently suggested, “But...he’s out there. Maybe you could reconcile?”

Anna snorted bitterly. “Not likely. Like you say, there was plenty of holonews about my return and then my emancipation from The Institute. He had all that time to show up. Not to mention twenty years to bother to try to get me from Covaris Two.”

Aisling very carefully asked, “Would he have had the means to do that?”

“Oh yeah. He’s in Starfleet. If he’d wanted to retrieve me dead or alive from that wreck he had ample opportunity. He never wanted me and I don’t want him,” Anna said through gritted teeth.

Aisling replied, “Oh, Anna, that’s so sad.”

“Is it?” Anna asked, looking up at Aisling, shaking her head. “Not really. Can’t miss what you never had.”

“I’m not so sure about that. But either way, you’re not alone anymore.”

“I guess,” Anna said with another little shrug.

“No guess about it,” Aisling said. “We’re your family now.”

Anna smiled at her politely.

Aisling wagged a finger in the air. “Aha, see, I know that look. It means, ‘Yeah Aisling, thanks, whatever, I don’t believe you but I’ll placate you.’ I get that look from Aoife all the time. But it’s okay. I understand. You don’t quite believe us yet and why should you? Probably already had lots of people promise to be your new family and then let you down.”

“Kind of,” Anna admitted, looking at the floor again.

“Mmhm,” Mack grunted.

Aisling said, “It happens a lot. People mean well when they use those words but if they come from a happy family it’s a bit too easy to toss such terms around. I come from a happy family but I know from experience that those if you who don’t need a lot more time to build up trust before you believe it. So you go ahead and let that build at your own pace because I fully intend to stick by you,” she said with a wide smile at Anna.

“Oh! Me too!” Andrea said, waving her arm in the air excitedly.

“Lots of us. Definitely Data and Geordi too,” Aisling said.

Anna nodded, but continued to stare at the floor. “I think about that stuff a lot. I’ve been realising lately that...I’m the living embodiment of other people’s responsibility, and I think maybe that’s why I apologise so much for everything, even stuff that I know isn’t my fault. I was created by parents who didn’t want me, as a tool of manipulation for my mother to trap my father and when it didn’t work, he rejected us both.”

Andrea and Aisling winced slightly, but Mack once again nodded as if she understood.

Anna continued, “And instead of taking responsibility for that, she blamed me. I guess I took that blame in on a deep level because even though I’ve figured out that it’s hardly my fault I was made, inside I still feel like...someone has to be responsible? Someone has to deal with it. She was never going to and she’s dead anyway. He’s never going to, that much is clear. So I had to take on all of the responsibility for myself and the adults in my life too.”

“Yeah,” Mack said quietly.

“I’ve been figuring out lately that that’s maybe why my gut reaction to everything that goes bad is to blame myself, even if I logically know it isn’t my fault. I don’t know how to stop that gut reaction. All I know is that when people get frustrated with me for apologizing so much, it makes it worse because then it really is my failure, and it all builds up into a giant wave that drowns me.”

“Okay,” Aisling said. “I’m going to make a mental note to not react so much to you apologising, and instead find ways to remind you that it’s not your burden. Would that help?”

“I don’t know. Maybe?”

“It’s worth a try,” Aisling said.

“This might sound rude, or even mean, but...I really want your father to get some kind of comeuppance,” Andrea said.

Anna smiled wryly. “Not going to happen. You’d be amazed at what a man can get away with when everyone thinks he’s a hero.”

“Well...maybe you should expose him?” Andrea suggested.

Anna shook her head. “Like I said, I don’t want the drama. I’m too responsible to do that. I’m better than that. I’m better than him,” she said defiantly, “and I don’t need any awards or accolades to know that. He had his chance, and now I think he’s probably just happy I’m keeping to myself. Or maybe he never even thinks of me at all. I wish I never had to think of him.”

“Then we won’t mention him again, will we?” Aisling said to the others. Her PADD made a soft chiming sound and she looked at it. She stood suddenly and said, “Oh shit! I’m so sorry to cut this

off but I need to get Aoife from the classroom before she picks the goddamned lock again!”

The tension broken, Anna smiled again. “I think it’s awesome that she can do that. Sorry.” Then she quickly added, “Sorry for being sorry. No wait, I’m not sorry. It’s just awesome.” She giggled a little.

Aisling grumbled, “There isn’t a lock on board this ship that can hold that child in if she’s of a mind to get through it.”

Andrea playfully countered, “Well, you haven’t actually tried the brig yet.”

Anna was aghast. “You can’t put a child in the brig!”

Aisling chuckled. “No, we can’t. In part because she’s asked to try it.”

Anna’s jaw dropped.

“Mmhm. Can’t even use it as a teasing threat because she’d leap for joy if I mentioned the possibility,” Aisling said.

“Gosh.”

“Yep. Oh! Hey, Anna, what are you doing next? Are you available?”

“For what?” Anna asked cautiously.

“Want to hang out with Aoife in our quarters? Sort of a babysitting practice, playdate combo?”

Anna leapt up off of the crates, rattling them behind her. “Really?”

“If you want to, you’re more than welcome.”

Anna bounced excitedly on her left foot and clapped her hands.

“I’d say come pick her up with me but...saucer section. So meet me by my quarters in about ten minutes. Deck Twenty-Three, Room 5223. Mack, Andrea, you two okay if we head out?”

Mack nodded.

Andrea said, “Sure thing. Hey Mack, want to go back down for more double fudgers?”

Mack grinned, nodded again, and got up to leave with Andrea as Aisling and Anna exited ahead of them.



Stardate 47242.8 (Monday 30/03/2370 15:15) — Deck Twenty-Three

Anna stood outside the door for Room 5223, facing aft so she could keep an eye on the turbolift nearly directly across from it, nervously but excitedly bouncing back and forth on her feet, favouring her biological leg as usual.

When at last the turbolift doors opened, Aoife came bursting out, saw Anna, and ran at her shouting, “Anna! Mom says we get to play!”

Anna crouched down to be more at eye-level with the little girl. “I know! I’m so happy! But I don’t even know how or what to play. You’ll have to teach me everything.”

Aoife’s grin turned decidedly wicked. “Oh. I can teach you so many things,” she said in a treacherous tone.

Aisling muttered something vaguely religious-sounding under her breath as she moved towards the door, prompting it to open.

Aoife tipped her head back and let out a very cartoonish cackle.

“Yeah yeah, you little villain in training, get inside already,” Aisling said with an ushering movement with her arm. “And pick your things up off the couch so Anna can sit on it.” She smiled both tiredly and apologetically at Anna, and then beckoned her inside as well.

Aoife scoffed, but hurried to shove her toys to one side of the couch nonetheless. “When I’m president, someone else will pick up my toys,” she grumbled.

“President?” Anna asked.

Aoife turned to her, put her hand on her hip, gave a confident little head-wiggle, and announced, “I’m going to be president of the moon when I grow up.”

Anna tilted her head in mild confusion. “Earth’s moon?” she guessed.

“Yeah,” Aoife said in a tone that indicated this was obvious and there could not possibly be any other choice.

“Huh,” said Anna as she sat on the cleanest side of the couch. “I didn’t know it had a president.”

Aoife threw herself into the middle position of the couch, bouncing on it, sending several of the toys on the other side tipping onto the floor. She explained, “It doesn’t, and that’s the problem.”

“It is?”

“Yes!” the little girl exclaimed, throwing her arms wide in exasperation. “Nobody is running the moon right!” She sighed dramatically, crossed her arms, and rolled her eyes.

Aisling barely stifled a snort of laughter from the little dining area in the other side of the large, central room.

“Um, okay,” Anna replied uncertainly.

Aoife was clearly unsatisfied with this response. She demanded, “Have you ever been there?”

“Actually no, I haven’t. Is it nice?” Anna asked tentatively.

“It’s boring!”

“It is? Gosh, that’s unfortunate.”

“Right!? It’s the moon!” Aoife shouted, her arms shooting out in emphasis again. “For cent’ries and cent’ries humans looked at it in the sky and imagined amazing things about it but you know what it is when you get there?”

“What?”

“Boring! I told you!” The child once again rolled her eyes and crossed her arms as if she could barely abide the ignorance before her.

Anna nodded firmly. “Okay, I believe you.”

“About time someone did!”

Anna tried a slightly different tactic, eager to deflect the small creature’s enormous outrage. “So as president how will you fix it?”

It worked. Aoife uncrossed her arms, grinned widely, got up on her knees, and leaned in close to Anna with her hand to the side of her mouth. She whispered, “Rides.”

“Rides?” Anna asked in a whisper of her own.

“Yeah. Low grav rides.”

Anna smiled at her. “Okay. Tell me more.”

Aoife wrinkled her nose in pure delight. “Rides that fling you and then you land way far away on a giant, squishy pillow.”

“That sounds very exciting!” Anna said.

Aoife’s expression suddenly became suspicious, and she leaned back with her arms crossed again. “Hm. Most grownups say, ‘dangerous’.”

Anna glanced towards Aisling, who was nodding at that. She turned her eyes back to Aoife and said, “I’m not really much of a grown-up, though. I’m kind of...different that way.”

Aoife narrowed her eyes. “Do you know the difference between a catta-pull and a tray-boo-chet?”

Taking care as before to not correct the child’s mispronunciations, Anna answered, “Um, I think one is like a cup on a stick that flings stuff and the other is more like a whippy thing on the end of a stick.”

Aoife regarded her closely.

Anna couldn’t tell if she’d passed or failed the little girl’s test. She deflected by asking, “What are you going to make the giant pillows out of?”

“Soft stuff,” Aoife said, as if it was obvious.

“Good plan,” Anna replied.

“I have designs. Wanna see?”

“I absolutely want to see all of your plans, yes please,” Anna replied in all earnestness.

“Yay!” Aoife squealed as she leapt off the couch, knocking more of the toy pile to the ground as she ran to her room.

Anna looked to Aoife, who gave her a grin, a thumbs-up, and a whisper of, “You’re doing great!”

Anna shrugged as Aoife came tearing back into the room with a set of crayon-scribbled papers. “See?” the child said, holding them up proudly.

“These are amazing blueprints!” Anna said. “Excellent planning. I like how you’ve remembered to include toilets.”

“Everyone’s got to poop somewhere!” Aoife shouted.

“Absolutely!”

“I wanted to send these to the President of the moon and Mom said there isn’t one, so I’m going to become one to make all this happen.”

“Oh, I think you’re thinking far too small.”

“I am?!”

“Definitely. You should become Federation President, because that includes Earth’s moons and a lot of other places too. You could design fun rides for all of them then,” Anna explained as if it was all very serious.

Aoife’s eyes went wide and her jaw dropped. She turned to Aisling and said in a reverential tone, “Mom! Did you hear? Anna said I could be President of the whole Federation!”

Aisling nodded as she tidied up the dining area. “If you work hard at school and learn to follow at least a few rules for a change, you could definitely run for Federation President when you’re old enough.”

Aoife narrowed her eyes again. “What’s ‘old enough’?”

Aisling said, “I think you have to be at least eighteen, but I don’t think anyone under thirty has ever been elected.”

Aoife’s jaw dropped again, this time in fresh outrage. “Eighteen?! That’s forever away!” She stamped her foot and pouted.

“No, it really isn’t!” Anna said. “It’s the perfect amount of time for you to get all of your plans in order. I’ll help you with them, if you want.”

Aoife blinked at her, wide-eyed. “You’ll play planning with me?”

“I’d love to,” Anna replied with genuine eagerness to engage in little-kid engineering.

Aoife let go of the paper with one hand, gripping it still with the other as it curled over her little arm. She reached out for Anna’s hand, so Anna reached back. Aoife gripped Anna’s hand tight and said, “I wanna be your friend for ever and ever.”

Anna bit her lip to fight back tears. “I’d really like that. Let’s design the best rides ever and ever.”

Aisling turned away to dab at her own eyes for a moment, then turned back to put her hands over her heart and nod meaningfully at Anna as Aoife spread her papers over the coffee table in front of the couch and then ran back into her room to get all of her markers and crayons.



Stardate 44242.9 (Monday 30/03/2370 15:45) — Deck Twenty-Three — Room 5223, Navarro Quarters

Aisling read security reports at the dining table while Anna and Aoife sat on the floor by the coffee table, happily drawing and colouring exciting plans for low-gravity rides together. Aisling noticed that for the first time in ages her shoulders were relaxed as she read. While she was still paying some attention to her child, it was pleasant observation of the adorable play going on instead of the usual high-stress monitoring of a precocious and fearless three-year-old.

Anna has a magic about her, Aisling thought. And endless patience. I’ve never seen Aoife sit still that long for anyone. And holy hell she got Mack to say whole sentences.

The door opened and a man who fully fit the classic description of tall, dark, and handsome stepped in. He had short, curly black hair, somewhat Polynesian features with medium-dark skin, and the slightest hint of points on his ears. He wore a blue uniform with two full pips on his collar. Before the door fully opened he grinned and called out, “Hi Punkin!”, but his charming smile evaporated in an instant when he beheld a stranger sitting in his quarters with his daughter.

Anna looked up at the sudden arrival of a man and immediately cringed.

Aisling started to stand, but Kajus' fists were already clenching as Anna's hands rose in a defensive twist to her chest. Kajus' eyes narrowed; Anna's were wide and filled with terror.

Before any of the adults could speak, Aoife shouted, "Daddy! Come see! Anna and I are making the best moon plans ever!"

Kajus turned to Aisling with a dark, questioning look. She positioned herself between Kajus and the others with her hands up in a placating gesture. "Down," she said softly. "Breathe." She gave him a dark look of her own, then put on a smile and cheerily said, "Kajus, my darling, I'd like to introduce you to Anna White. My friend that I told you about already?" she said with a prompting little nod. "And whom I invited here to play with Aoife today."

Aisling then stepped aside to let the two see each other again, turning her head towards Anna and finding her still in a defensive posture, visibly shaking but with a darkness in her eyes as well. Carefully she said, "Anna, this is my husband Kajus."

"That's my Daddy!" Aoife said with a grin as she roughly scribbled a purple crayon filling all over a piece of fantasy machinery Anna had drawn for her. She then picked up the paper and ran to Kajus with it, holding it aloft for him with both hands. "See Daddy? Anna showed me all about centipede forces!"

"Centripetal, Aoife," Aisling gently corrected. "Why don't you take Anna to your bedroom and show her your toys in there?"

Aoife pushed the paper into Kajus' hand, which forced him to relax his grip. "Here Daddy, you hold this." She then bounded over to Anna and said, "Come see what I made with my snap bricks!"

Anna looked to Aisling, who nodded and made a waving motion, so she got up and followed Aoife into the next room without taking her eyes off of Kajus at all until she was around the corner.

Aisling then hustled Kajus into their bedroom on the opposite side, where she quickly whispered, "I'm sorry, I should have pre-warned you that someone was in here, I know, but I need you to back down right now. There's no threat here, Kajus. Okay?"

“This is the crash victim you told me about? That had no parenting?”

“Yeah. The one who is terrified of aggressive men.”

He glared for a moment, then sighed, took a deep breath, and his shoulders loosened a little. “I’m not being aggressive.”

Adopting a more sympathetic tone, Aisling took his hand between hers and said, “I know you don’t mean to be. I know in your head you went into auto-defence-mode for your kid. But Anna’s not a threat. She’s actually been amazing with Aoife already. She’s a godsend! She doesn’t just put up with Aoife’s sass and nonsense, she seems to love it. This is the first chance we’ve had in ages to get a babysitter.” She leaned in closer, pressing herself against his arm, and added, “And you do want a date night again sometime this decade, don’t you?”

Kajus raised an eyebrow for a moment, but then glowered again. “What are her qualifications?”

“For babysitting? That she’s a decent human being who can play with Aoife for a couple of hours sometime. An adult in the room who could summon emergency help if needed. She raised herself without getting herself killed, didn’t she? And that’s why you two should be friends. You both had hellish childhoods. You both had to survive on your own too much of the time. Instead of setting each other off, you should sympathise with each other.”

“I’m not good at making friends,” he muttered.

“I know, and she struggles with it too. But you’re both making progress. So how about you put on a nice smile, lose the overprotective posture, and trust me that I wouldn’t invite anyone dangerous into our home?”

Kajus blinked at Aisling and then put on an enormous, toothy grin.

“Oh Saints alive preserve us, no, no, Kajus, not like that,” she said as she raised her hands to his cheeks and tried to pull his lips closed. “Nice smile. Not an ‘I could eat you alive’ smile, please.”

He smirked awkwardly, so she pulled his head closer and gave him a loud smooch. Like magic, the rest of the tension left his

body, leaving a boyish little smile on his face amidst an endearingly tender expression.

She patted his cheek. "Much better. That's the fella I fell-a in love-a with. Now come on. Let's get poor Anna to climb down off the ceiling too, okay?"

He nodded, so she took his hand again and led him through the central room over to Aoife's door. They could hear the little girl explaining her constructions to Anna as they approached.

As they stepped into the bedroom, Anna looked up at them, her eyes darting back and forth, her whole posture one of fight or flight.

But Aoife was not going to allow her spotlight to be stolen. "Anna!" she shouted. "You're not looking!"

Anna stammered, "Trying to. Sorry."

"It's okay," Aisling said. "We don't want to interrupt."

"Well you are interrupting!" Aoife shouted in protest. "You told me to show her stuff!"

"I did, and we want to see too, don't we, Kajus?"

Aoife's eyes narrowed. "I already showed this to you."

"You did," Kajus said. "And...uh...it's pretty complicated because you build such amazing things, Punkin." He squatted down low, which prompted Aoife to go hug him. As he hugged her back, he looked over her head at Anna and tried to subtly help by saying, "Probably Anna's just tired after a long day and it's going to take more than one explanation to understand it all. Right?"

Anna unclenched slightly, but still moved herself to the furthest corner of the room away from him.

"Yeah," Aisling chimed in. "We're all just...a little tired. But safe. Everything's fine, okay?"

Anna stared at her for a moment, and then looked towards the floor, unclenching further but twisting her fingers together. "I guess so. Sorry."

"Daddy, can Anna stay for dinner?" Aoife asked.

"Uh..." he began.

“Anna’s more than welcome to stay if she wants,” Aisling quickly interjected. “But I know it’s sometimes hard for Anna to eat in...unfamiliar places.”

Anna took the lifeline as offered and nodded. “I...um...I’m not hungry anyway. And...tired. Definitely tired. Probably should...go.”

“No!” Aoife cried out, lurching out of her father’s arms to run to Anna with her arms out, but then stopping short and pulling her arms back against herself. “Mom says you don’t like hugs but I want you to stay and play some more.”

Anna smiled awkwardly and bent over a little. “Hugs are hard for me. Maybe someday. And...I do want to play some more. We can play again soon, right?” she asked the others.

“Definitely,” Aisling said. “Any time.”

“Tomorrow?” Aoife asked.

“I...I don’t know,” Anna said. “I’m...I’m not even sure what I’m doing tomorrow yet.”

“Tomorrow’s going to be busy because we’re arriving at a starbase, like I told you,” Aisling said to Aoife. “Anna’s been helping me help Mack.”

Aoife said to Anna, “Mack doesn’t like hugs either. Grownups are so confusing.”

Anna chuckled briefly in a way that seemed to surprise even herself. She put a hand over her mouth, but then moved it to whisper to Aoife, “Grownups are ridiculously confusing! I’m confused all the time!”

“Really?” Aoife asked.

“Really.”

“Maybe I can come play in your quarters?”

Anna blinked. “Oh. Gosh. I don’t have any toys there.”

Aoife wrinkled her nose in disbelief. She pointed to her bed and said, “You have a bed, don’t you?”

Anna appeared baffled.

Aoife rolled her eyes and put her hands on her hips. “You can jump on a bed. That counts as a toy.”

“Oh,” Anna said. “I’ve...never done that.”

“What?!” Aoife shouted, then put on an exaggerated jaw-drop. “You’ve never jumped on a bed?”

“Yeah, that’s actually a little hard to believe,” Kajus said with a suspicious expression until Aisling glared at him.

But instead of fear, Anna reacted with an irate snap. “I grew up on a Starfleet ship. The beds are fixed to the floor.”

“Well...yeah,” Kajus said. “That certainly hasn’t stopped anyone in here,” he added with a playful eye towards Aoife.

The girl giggled and grinned at him.

“The floor was like this,” Anna said flatly, holding her elbow up and tipping her forearm down on an angle.

Aisling elbowed Kajus and he turned away from all of them, scratching the back of his neck. “Oh. Um. Right,” he said.

Aoife asked, “Then how’d you sleep?”

Anna glared for a moment more at Kajus, but then turned to regard Aoife gently again. She shrugged and said, “At first, just wherever I could. Later I made aerial silks, which are big cloth things that hang down, and I learned to use those like a kind of hammock.”

Aoife’s jaw dropped for real this time. She turned wide-eyed to her parents and said, “Mom! Daddy! I want to sleep in an a-real silk!”

Aisling and Kajus looked at each other dubiously.

Anna said, “Aoife, that’s hard to do in quarters like this. But Data showed me how to make some on the holodeck. Maybe sometime we can do that, okay?” But then her expression fell again. “But...mostly...um, I only do that late at night so nobody else is around up there.” She put a hopeful smile back on and clarified, “Maybe someday I’ll feel brave enough to do that when you’re allowed to be awake. But I need you to give me some time for that, okay?”

Aoife considered this proposal, and then nodded. “Okay. We can keep playing here for now, I guess.”

Anna nodded, her expression strained.

Aisling decided it was time to take over. She stepped towards Anna with a beckoning hand out. “Sounds good. Anna, come with me. It’s okay. Aoife, take Daddy to the couch and show him your drawings.”

Once the way was clear for Anna and Aisling to get to the outer door, Aisling quietly said, “Thank you for coming over. I’m sorry I bungled the preparation. I should have warned him and you. Everything okay now?”

Anna nodded, but her posture still appeared tense.

“Do you need me to walk you to your quarters?”

Anna shook her head. “I can tube down fast enough.”

“Okay. See you in the morning in the cargo bay, start of shift?”

Anna nodded again.

“All right. You let me know if you need anything.”

But Anna was edging towards the door, so Aisling let her go with a smile and a wave. As soon as the door closed Aisling let out a long sigh, realising that managing multiple adults’ trauma was going to take more work than a simple social visit.



Stardate 44243.2 (Monday 30/03/2370 18:15) — Bridge

As Picard arrived on the bridge, Riker jested from his own chair, “Productive or relaxing afternoon, sir?”

Picard gave him an amiable little smile and sat down. “Bit of both, Number One.” He leaned closer and said more quietly, “I did some research on some possible old-school uses for various rocks and ores.”

“Find anything useful?”

“I don’t think so,” Picard admitted with a sigh. “I ended up walking down memory lane instead, reminiscing about our town’s one and only recycling and replication facility.”

Riker grinned broadly. “Oh yeah. Our area only had the one big centre and it was several towns over. But then we all had replicators in our houses, unlike your pastoral upbringing.”

“Indeed,” Picard replied with an eyebrow slightly raised to acknowledge yet simultaneously brush away the tease.

“Going without a replicator would have been a lot harder in an Alaskan winter than your French one,” Riker said, and then leaned back in his chair. “Still, I loved any excuse Dad gave us to go to the bigger town.” He sighed happily and drummed his fingers on his chest. Then he sat back up to lean over closer to Picard once more. “When I was a teenager there were these twins — barely older than me — who worked at the recycling centre. Adam and Alexandra. Utterly gorgeous, both of them. And...worldly.”

“Is that so?” Picard asked with a firmly neutral expression.

Riker grinned again. “Let’s just say that I was very, very motivated to do a lot of brush clearing so we always had stuff to take over there. They...uh...taught me a lot.”

“About recycling and replicating, no doubt?”

Riker chuckled. “Yeah. R and R for sure.”

Picard nodded sagely. “A very informative and important topic, number one. Quite...educational. “

Riker sat back again, still grinning, as Picard tugged down on his uniform shirt and looked ahead at the viewscreen to begin the formal arrival and docking procedures at the starbase.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

Stardate 47244.6 (Tuesday 31/03/2370 06:55) — Deck Eight

The next morning, Picard exited his quarters to find Doctor Crusher coming towards him, tricorder in hand. He paused to allow her to catch up to him.

“There you are,” she said. “Are you all right?”

Initially baffled but then feeling somewhat defensive against her urgent and mothering tone, he replied, “Hm? Why wouldn’t I be?”

She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at him, scrutinising him closely. “I don’t know. Wesley contacted me out of the blue, worried about you.”

“Ah,” he said, and resumed walking towards the turbolift.

She followed him closely, whispering “He said you apologised to him?”

They entered the turbolift. Picard said, “Bridge,” and then turned to Beverly. “I did. It occurred to me that I’d been rude to him several times and that an apology was in order.”

“You were often rude to him, but he doesn’t hold that against you. Why now?”

“Because...as I just said, it occurred to me. Is it wrong to apologise?”

She narrowed her eyes again, studying him further. Then she suddenly looked more sympathetic. “Is this about Anna? Did something happen?”

“No,” he said quickly. “That is, nothing’s happened. Nothing’s changed. It’s all...well it is what it is, isn’t it?” he said as the turbolift door opened to the bridge.

“Captain on the bridge,” Data declared, rising from the captain’s chair formally as he always did.

Picard shot Crusher a dire look of warning. She sighed, rolled her eyes, and walked back to the turbolift.

He pretended to ignore her as he said, “Thank you, Mr. Data,” and took command of his ship, certain of the one thing he could control in his life at the moment.



Stardate 47244.6 (Tuesday 31/03/2370 06:58) — Deck Thirty-Seven — Cargo Bays

Aisling saw Anna tentatively enter the cargo bay, peering around to check who was in there before she stepped fully in. Once she saw that it was only their little group, she seemed to relax a bit but continued twisting her fingers.

“There you are, good,” Aisling said, heading straight to her side.

Anna shrugged awkwardly. “Not sure why I’m needed here today?”

“Well, probably none of us are except for Mack, and even she isn’t technically required yet. We won’t be getting stuff in here until a bit later, but it’s a good place to sit and wait for work while engineering is busy finishing up the overnight stuff with various refillings and refuellings,” Aisling admitted. “Besides, mostly I wanted to make sure you weren’t hiding away after meeting Kajus. Plus it can’t hurt to learn about cargo management and related security. Moving people and things place to place is a lot of the boring, standard work of Starfleet.”

Anna twisted her mouth to the side, brows furrowed. “I’d have thought other ships do that.”

“We all do it. The flagship gets some of the fancier people and cargo now and then, but out here on the edge of Federation space we spend a lot of time helping colonies grow and stay strong, plus

wooing non-member worlds into joining up by showing them perks.”

“And massive amounts of stuff counts as a perk,” Andrea said from nearby. “And hey, you got to meet Kajus? How was —”

Riker’s voice suddenly came booming out of the main ship comms. “*First shift station teams are cleared for entry at this time. Please proceed to your designated connection points.*”

Anna cringed at the announcement, twisted her fingers more tightly, and began muttering, “Twigs and string, twigs and string.”

“Hey, hey, it’s fine,” Aisling said gently. “They’re all going to be focused on the saucer section bays again this morning.” Then she raised an eyebrow and asked, “Wait, what? Twigs and string?”

Anna grunted softly, flapped her hands a little by her sides, and shifted uneasily back and forth. “It’s...it’s just a weird thing I say to feel better.”

“Okay,” Aisling said. “That’s...good? If it helps?”

Anna looked at her sheepishly. “Sort of.” Then she sighed and rolled her eyes. “It’s from my Grandma. I already told Data about it before when I got upset right after I got here.” She suddenly glowered deeply and muttered, “Also because of that creepy man.”

“Creepy man?” Aisling asked.

Anna pointed to the room’s comm speaker.

“Oh,” Aisling replied, then more awkwardly added, “Ah...oh. Okay. Uh...right.”

“He makes me nervous. He’s...creepy.”

“Um...Commander Riker sometimes comes on...strong,” Aisling said carefully.

Anna grunted and crossed her arms defensively. “Anyway, when I was really sad because we were about to leave Earth, my Grandma told me that whenever it was all too much but I couldn’t just shout or cry, I should imagine that I’m collecting all the bits of twig and string I can find inside of me and wrap them all together to hold myself up until I could find a safe place to cry later.”

Mack and Andrea drew nearer with sympathetic expressions as Aisling said, “Wow. That’s...really sweet. She sounds lovely.”

Anna nodded. “She died just after the Baltimore crashed, so I didn’t even know it until I got back. But I always figured she had, because otherwise...she would’ve sent someone...or...” Anna took a deep breath and flapped her hands hard again for a moment, stepping back away from the other three. “Sorry, sorry, I just...this is a lot.”

“You’re overwhelmed. Got it. Do you want to sit down in here and let us shower you with kindness or do you need to go?” Aisling asked. “You can cry in here. Nobody will mind.”

“I can go get you a double fudger if you want,” Andrea offered.

That made Anna suddenly laugh for a moment, which in turn broke her cringe and stopped her hands. She sighed again, rubbed her palms on her eyes, and then said, “No, I’m fine. I’m a big girl now. I can cope. I will think of all my twigs and string.” Then she dropped her hands and added, “But you know what? Sitting would be good.”

The four of them returned to their crate-seats from the day before.

“We don’t have to go onto the starbase this time, do we?” Anna asked, clearly not in the mood for tourism.

“Ugh, no, not here,” Aisling said, wrinkling her nose. “This one’s not like 84. This one’s pretty much just a boring, ugly transport hub. It doesn’t have the population or the activities of 84. There’s a replimat but no restaurants or anything.”

“Parts of it are even smelly,” Andrea added.

“Yeah, it’s got some of the stinkier parts of ship refuelling and waste management. It’s safe enough — actually pretty heavily guarded in places because it’s a cargo transfer point — but it’s dull and not worth visiting.”

“Then why are we staying so long?” Anna asked.

“Because of some high-profile people we’re taking on. We’re waiting for them to arrive so we’re leisurely doing the other stuff while we wait,” Aisling explained.

“Gosh. Must be important people to make a whole starship wait,” Anna said.

“One of them is Ambassador Troi,” Aisling said, making Anna immediately cringe. Aisling asked her, “What?”

Anna carefully replied, “I don’t like mind-readers.”

“Oh, right,” Aisling said. “Well like I’ve told you before, Counselor Troi can’t actually do that. Ambassador Troi can but it’s not like she’s coming down to the drive section for anything. And she’ll be busy anyway. She’s been working with some other telepaths the Federation is courting.” Aisling quickly held up a placating hand. “Relax, from what I hear they can’t even understand human thoughts. Our minds are too different, like not just different languages but from what I read it’d be like trying to talk to one of the dolphins without a Cetacean Ops headset. Nobody’s coming to spy on your brain, Anna, I promise.”

The doors to the bay opened, and Data and Geordi walked in.

Anna immediately burst into a huge smile towards Data and visibly relaxed. Andrea also smiled widely, blushing a little as she made coquettish eyes at Geordi.

Mack observed Data’s affect on Anna and quickly turned towards Aisling with a shocked expression. Aisling nodded slowly back, causing Mack to sigh resolutely.

Geordi said, “Glad you’re all here. I’m going over to the starbase soon to figure out exactly what we’ll be loading in. I’ll send you a manifest as soon I have it,” he said to Mack in particular.

She nodded at him.

Data meanwhile nodded at each of them in a polite greeting, but then settled his gaze upon Anna and smiled at her. “How are you today?” he asked genially.

“I’m okay,” she said lightly, as if she hadn’t been so worked up mere moments before. “And you?”

“I am functioning within normal parameters,” he replied.

Anna giggled.

Data grinned at her.

Andrea continued beaming at Geordi. Geordi and Aisling watched Data and Anna for a moment, then looked at each other

with a shared, small shrug. Geordi then noticed Andrea and awkwardly said, “Um...hi. Everything...okay?”

“Yes sir,” Andrea said in a softly flirtatious manner.

Aisling shot Geordi an annoyed look as he grimaced towards her.

Mack rolled her eyes.

“Actually, can I have a word, sir?” Aisling said, somewhat mimicking Andrea’s softness on the last word.

Geordi groaned but said, “Sure,” and went through to one of the connected bays.

Andrea watched them go with a disappointed little sigh, then stood up to go check something on one of the wall screens.

Mack stood and then went back to her usual fussing over shelves.

Once out of hearing range, Aisling whispered to Geordi, “You need to do something about that.”

“I know, I know. I don’t want to be mean, though.”

“So don’t be mean. Yesterday she said she’s not going to believe you’re not into her until she hears it from you.”

“Okay, I got it. Message received. I’ll...just let me get some stuff done today first.”

Aisling gave him the dire-mother look she usually reserved for Aoife when it was way past bedtime.

Geordi sighed. “I promise I’ll do it before we leave this starbase.”

Aisling softened a little. “Okay. It’s not like I’m happy about it either. I’m going to be picking up the pieces for weeks.”

“Not if I do a good job of it.”

“Then do a good job of it.”

Geordi lifted his hands, took a step back, and then headed out the door of that bay.

Aisling rolled her eyes and went back to the open partition between the bays just in time to hear Anna giggle loudly.

“Would you like to hear another?” Data asked.

“Of course!” Anna replied enthusiastically.

Aisling couldn't quite hear what was said, but it was pretty clear from the call and response that he was telling Anna jokes and it was doing wonders for her mood.

*I wonder if he knows just how much he's reset her today,* Aisling thought. She then walked over to Mack in the opposite corner of the room.

Mack glanced up at Aisling as she approached, nodded towards Data and Anna, and then shrugged.

"Yeah, it's always like that," Aisling said.

Mack nodded approvingly. "It's nice."

"You okay? I was going to warn you but I hadn't had the chance."

Mack shrugged again and then muttered, "We'd be good, but those two are perfect."

"Yeah, but they don't see it yet."

Mack rolled her hand in little circles to the side, indicating something progressing through time.

"Pretty much," Aisling replied.

Anna giggled loudly again, this time with a snort.

Mack smiled. "Good sound."

Aisling nodded. "It really is."

Mack muttered, "Never seen him smile like that before."

"He does it a lot with her. It's all pretty good."

Mack nodded again.

Data then approached Aisling and Mack, his smile having reverted to his normal, polite one. He asked Mack, "Are you also doing well?"

Mack smiled back with yet another nod.

"Good," Data said. "I am required in engineering but please do not hesitate to call on me if I can assist you in any way."

"Thanks, Data," Aisling said.

He turned and left, waving to Anna as he passed her on the way out. She grinned and waved back at him delightedly.

"He still keeps tabs on you?" Aisling asked Mack quietly.

"Hasn't stopped since Tasha..." Mack said, trailing off.

“Yeah,” Aisling replied. “Okay. Right. I guess that’s good too. Data’s good for everyone.”



Stardate 47244.7 (Tuesday 31/03/2370 07:45) — Starbase 219 —  
Replimat

“Good to see you again,” La Forge said cheerily as he shook hands with Kraff Tzuri, an independent freighter captain. “What can I help you with?”

The two sat down with their coffee mugs at a small table at the edge of the replimat. It was all very utilitarian with no decor to speak of, but it was clean and the food was as decent as anywhere else.

Tzuri handed La Forge a Federation civilian-style PADD. “Here’s my wish list. I always appreciate your folks’ help when I’m overloaded with orders.”

La Forge took the PADD and started quickly scrolling through the list. “Business that good, huh?”

“Busy, not always good. You know how it can be.”

La Forge smiled a little. “Yeah, I do. I’m guessing you’re asking for help on the less lucrative items.”

Tzuri chuckled. “The stuff poorer folks need is always in higher demand but pays next to nothing. If I couldn’t refuel for free at Federation stations and ask for help with some of this stuff, I wouldn’t be able to pay my employees. It’s not like I work in the inner worlds where money is an outdated concept. Out here —”

“Latinum talks, I know,” La Forge said. Then his brow furrowed at something on the list. “What’s with all of these old-model hull plates? That’s a lot of bulk and can’t be worth much at all.”

“Exactly,” Tzuri said. “Again, we’re not in the middle of Federation territory. This out here,” he said, gesticulating all

around, “this is outskirts, and a lot of folks are still using those old reactive armour plates on century-old ships.”

La Forge whistled disapprovingly through his teeth. “They need to get upgraded to even basic deflector tech.”

“I’m not the one who needs to be told that, trust me. I’ve got that for my ship. But there are these little, old colonies scattered out here from every civilisation in the area, all bartering ancient tech just to get by. I got stuck with that lot of plates in a pity-barter with the folks trying to get their soil to work on Arcnir Three. They’re out of Federation space but I talked Commander Snrag here on 219 into donating an old hydroprocessor to them when I was bringing them their order of saplings from the researchers from Starbase 84. The researchers were covering my fee so I didn’t mind taking on a bit extra to help out.”

“You’re such a charitable guy,” La Forge teased as he set Tzuri’s PADD on his own to copy the list across.

“I actually am at times, because it makes for good customer relations. If Arcnir thrives because I helped out, they’ll call me in for pay when they can afford it. So I gave them the hydroprocessor and they gave me these plates. I guess they’ve been stripping their old ships for parts. I managed to source a buyer from Phelan who is willing to pick them up at Deep Space Four, and since that’s where you’re going next...” he said with a wide shrug.

“Yeah, fine, should be okay. Can you dock for loading, though? I don’t think ancient reactive plates are approved for the transporter.”

“They’re not. That’s why I already have them on air pallets in a bay here on the station, ready for you to cart in at your leisure.”

“My leisure?” La Forge said with a laugh. “Yeah, okay, that’s very convenient.”

Tzuri grinned. “I figured I’d better make it easy for you to say yes.”

“And if I’d said no?”

“Eh, I’d wait for the next ship coming through. Snrag doesn’t charge me a cargo fee when he knows I’m helping out. See? Being charitable goes around.”

“Well, that’s kind of the whole Federation point of getting rid of the money in the first place.”

“You know that, and I know that, but tell my non-Federation crew members that. Or when I have to dock at a Ferengi station. But who knows, maybe if we all keep playing nice, those precious Federation values will spread.”

“Yeah right, the Ferengi are going to go socialist all of a sudden out of the goodness of their hearts,” La Forge said with a chuckle. “I’ve got some room in our lower bays. I’ll get my folks to arrange to get these on board through the docking.”

Tzuri stuck out his hand and the two shook again. “Oh, and...uh...La Forge?” he asked as they stood.

“Yeah?”

“Do me a favour and make sure I get the air pallets back? I’ve got to pay for those things too out here.”

“You’ve got them marked?”

“Yes, with my ship registry and contact details.”

“Then I’ll make a note for my drive section cargo manager to make sure they get put back. She’s very fastidious. You’ll get them back stacked in order if you have them numbered.”

“Wow. She looking for a non-Starfleet job?”

“No chance in hell,” La Forge said as he handed the PADD back to Tzuri. “Mack is family.”



Stardate 47245.2 (Tuesday 31/03/2370 11:45) — Main  
Engineering

When Mack was called up to co-ordinate with other cargo managers up in the saucer section bays, Aisling cheerfully

suggested, “Hey Anna, Andrea, let’s go back to main engineering and see if we’re needed up there for anything interesting.”

The two younger ladies nodded and went out of the cargo bay ahead of Aisling, who turned back and waved at Mack. Mack gave Aisling a thumbs up and started gathering her PADDs.

Aisling noted that Anna was nervous as usual in the turbolift, but once again the short trip with nobody else entering along the way allowed her to relax as they reached Deck Thirty-Six.

However, as they approached the entrance to main engineering all three of them could clearly hear Dean’s voice grumbling from just inside the door. “She pretends to be this great genius but anyone in this room could beat her on a basic warp systems test.”

Kevin could be heard to reply, “I doubt that. Even if it were true, would it matter?”

“White’s no prodigy, Kevin. She got lucky and people feel sorry for her, that’s all,” Dean replied. “Don’t tell me you’re buying into this story too. I had higher hopes for you.”

Anna’s eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms angrily. Aisling put up a hand and shook her head, then lifted a finger to her lips so they could continue to listen.

When Kevin didn’t reply, Dean continued, “La Forge has to pretend to show me up to keep White happy because otherwise he looks like he’s picking on the poor little Baltimore girl. He knows I’m a better engineer than her. We all are. It just pisses me off that we have to pretend like she knows anything. We ought to give her a pop quiz just to see her fall apart in front of everyone,” Dean said with a confident chuckle.

Anna let out a small growl, then let her arms fall to her sides as she lifted her head up high. She strode into main engineering with a cold, regal bearing, came up behind Dean, and announced, “I’m available right now if you would like to test that theory.”

Dean jumped and let out a little yelp of surprise. Kevin turned towards the LCARS panel in front of him, pretending to see none of what was happening.

Andrea and Aisling entered behind Anna, both of them grinning at Dean's reaction. There were scattered titters of laughter at him from other engineers in the room as well.

But Anna's expression remained stony, her stature tall and firm, her icy gaze fixed upon Dean as he withered beneath it.

He tried to likewise stand tall but was too taken aback by her sudden appearance to make it work. He scoffed at her but it came out as a feeble and pathetic sound, so he marched out of the room which induced more laughter from those who had witnessed the show.

Anna turned her head slightly to the side to half-heartedly watch him go, her continued demeanour suggesting that he was unimportant, unworthy of her full attention. She then stared straight ahead towards the pulsating drive, prompting the others in the room to stop laughing and return to their tasks, all of them inexplicably feeling as if they'd witnessed the captain himself dress Dean down before them.

Aisling came up from behind to her left side and whispered, "That was awesome."

Anna did not reply. She didn't even move.

Andrea moved to Anna's right side. "You okay?"

"Yes," Anna replied flatly. "What is our next task?"

"Uh, let me see what's in the stack that we can do together," Aisling said, hurrying past her to the shelf of PADDs. She flipped through them and said, "You know, there isn't much in here yet. Maybe we should get lunch and give the loading teams more time to get us more to do? There'll be security scanning to do later."

"Fine," Anna said. She turned crisply on her biological heel and walked out to the corridor.

Aisling and Andrea exchanged a concerned look before hurrying to follow her.

In the corridor, Anna let go of the facade and slumped against the wall, sighing and grumbling. "That man is exhausting," she muttered.

"He definitely is," Aisling replied.

Anna looked at her tiredly. "I'm not hungry."

"No, I figured. Let's go in here for a minute and decompress," she said, pointing towards a nearby meeting room.

The three went in and sat down. Once the door was closed Anna let out a long groan.

"Yeah," Aisling said. "That sucked. But I meant what I said, you were awesome about it. I mean literally, as I am full of awe. Your reaction was wow-level."

"I don't like doing...that. The puffed-up thing. It's so draining. It's not me."

Andrea smiled gently at Anna, "I wish I could put on a mask like that. You looked like...like a queen!"

"A queen that was about to eat Dean's head right off of his body, and he'd have deserved it," Aisling said with an appreciative chuckle.

Anna groaned again, and then gestured towards her mouth with a finger in a vomit-inducing motion. Then she put her head in her hands and said, "Why can't he just leave me be? Does he really spend that much time smack-talking me? It clearly made Ensign Wong uncomfortable."

"Kevin's fallen under Dean's wing a bit too much," Aisling muttered. "Geordi's probably going to have to mount a rescue mission eventually before that poor kid gets corrupted. I think they have similar backgrounds, but we need to find better role models for Kevin before it's too late."

"Kevin's sweet," Andrea said. "Dean bullies him into following him around and I don't think Kevin knows how to refuse."

"Good to know," Aisling said. "I'll make sure Geordi knows. And that he knows Dean's still being an asshole to you, Anna."

"But why?" Anna insisted. "Why? All of this because I rejected his advice about my leg on that first day I was in engineering? Is he that fragile?"

"Yes," Aisling and Andrea said in unison. Aisling continued, "Absolutely. He was a jerk before you got here, but he didn't have a focused target until you. He decided you were good to pick on

for whatever reason and now he's fixated on that. He's...well he's like a predator, and he's chosen you as prey."

Anna cringed and pulled a face of mixed disgust and fear.

"No, I don't mean he's going to physically attack you. I mean he's of that predatory mindset, same as he is with Kevin. Predators of his sort find people they can dominate, but his continued inability to dominate you drives him bonkers. He can't let it go because he sees you checking out rooms before you enter, cringing at threats, all of that stuff, so he assumes he can pick on you. But then you come out swinging and he can't stand it. Every time you rebuke him it stings, and then a thousand times more when everyone else takes your side," Aisling explained.

Anna crossed her arms defiantly. "I don't mean to be so nervous all the time though. I can't help it."

"No, I know that. I'm not blaming you. I'm saying jerks like him pick up on that stuff and try to exploit it. Nice people see you like that and want to help you, to make you feel better. That's why Data tells you jokes and I want to feed you warm cookies."

"I kind of want to jump in between you and Dean but...I'm not good at confrontation," Andrea admitted shyly.

Anna sighed and mustered a small smile of appreciation for Andrea. "You shouldn't have to be good at that." She rolled her eyes and added, "He really isn't very bright. I don't get why he even gets to be in this job."

"No, he isn't bright, and you're right that he's a mediocre engineer at best. Sadly not everyone even on the flagship is top-notch. Sometimes people get put in positions because they did well on a test somewhere or impressed the right person in the placement phase. Frankly, with someone like Dean, it's not smarts or talent. It's determination. He's one determined fucker so he probably got here by doing whatever it took to get the job."

Anna wrinkled her nose in derision.

Aisling continued, "We get all kinds in here: the natural geniuses who barely need Academy courses at all, the ones who are smart enough and resilient enough to tough it out to get by, and

then the ones who are definitely not the sharpest knives in the drawer but they want to get out of some shitty situation or other so they're willing to study and work and study and work and study and work until their eyes fall out and their hands fall off and their legs give out. Dean's one of those. Some of those types are people you can really respect and admire, but occasionally you get one like Dean who comes out of it with a big, fat chip on their shoulder, knowing they had to work harder to get here so anyone who seemed to have gotten here easily is an automatic enemy."

"Easily?!" Anna retorted, sitting up straight.

Aisling lifted her hands. "I'm not saying you had it easy! I mean that a guy like Dean sees an expert like you come in without any Academy training and that pisses him off, so he has to tell himself you must have cheated or used your backstory or whatever. Cognitive dissonance paired with resentment is a bad recipe, and that's what Dean's got cooking."

"I just hope Kevin's not agreeing with him," Andrea said. "People like that get so much worse if they get someone agreeing with them."

"I hope not too," Aisling said.

Anna slumped again. "It sounded like Kevin wanted to disagree but..." she trailed off into another sigh.

"Absolutely," Aisling agreed. "Which is why I'm going to have Geordi intervene. But for now, it's best if we just keep you away from Dean as much as possible. And when we can't, Anna, remember how everyone took your side during your speech, and how just now in that room he became the laughing stock, not you. You're not fighting him alone, Anna. We've got your back. Brava to you for standing up to him today but don't let his bullshit eat at you. You're better than him. We all know it. Okay?"

Anna shrugged, but then nodded a little. She said, "I think...I'm kind of tired. Is it okay if I don't do more cargo stuff today?"

"Of course," Aisling said. "You actually don't have to do any of this. I just want you to know that you're wanted. If you need to go

to your quarters, you don't need permission. Go rest, and then join us later or not as suits you."

Anna nodded again. The three of them stood and exited the room. Once in the corridor, Anna quickly went to the vertical Jefferies tube and scurried up it without another word.

Aisling and Andrea shrugged sadly at each other, and then went into the break room for lunch.

# CHAPTER NINE

Stardate 47247.4 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 07:20) — Main Engineering

Aisling made a beeline for Geordi in his chief engineer's corner as soon as she got to engineering. He looked up as she approached and raised a defensive hand as she put hers on her hips.

"I know," he said. "I already took care of it."

"I wasn't going to ask about Andrea yet."

"No, uh...not her. I will, though. I said I would. I mean Dean and Kevin."

"Really?" Aisling said as she relaxed her posture and leaned against the wall beside his console.

"Yeah. Trust me, I got an earful from a bunch of folks last night. I've put Dean on a list of assignments that make sure he won't be on this whole deck at all for the next several days at the very least, or anywhere near a cargo bay, or Anna's quarters and lab. I've sent Kevin to work with Reg on saucer section stuff."

"Reg?" Aisling asked with a hint of disapproval.

"Reg and Kevin work well together and compliment each other's engineering knowledge. Pairing them up means Dean can't just go scoop up Kevin whenever he feels like it. Kevin's not good at refusing Dean."

"Clearly. Does Dean know?"

"Yeah," Geordi said. "I told him to back off Anna, Kevin, everyone. He's not happy about it but at this point that's his problem. I made it clear to him that I hate this personnel-managerial crap so he'd better take some time to sort out his attitude if he wants to remain part of this team."

"Wow," Aisling said appreciatively. "Good job, boss."

Geordi grunted and shrugged.

“I can’t have my regular girls’ club today because I have some security tasks outside of their clearances,” Aisling said. “So I have another favour to ask.”

“Dealing with Dean isn’t a favour to you, you know,” Geordi said with a hint of warning.

Aisling rolled her eyes a little but nodded in concession. “Okay, got it. I’ll stop meddling on that front.”

“Thank you. I would appreciate that. So what’s the favour you want?”

She leaned in closer and whispered, “Give Anna something good to do with Data today.”

“Data will be here any minute. He and I are going to —”

Data came up behind Aisling at that very moment and said, “Good morning Geordi. Good morning Aisling.”

“Just the fella I was hoping to see,” Aisling said, grinning at him.

Data blinked and then smiled back genially.

“As I was saying, Data and I are going to be working on the backup interface between the starboard computer core and the starbase all day,” Geordi said. “I’ll be here mostly but back and forth to the bridge a bit.”

“I will begin in the systems monitor room at the top of the core on Deck Five, but then progress down to the section on Deck Eleven for access to the chipset there, as we are overdue for inspection and backup to that set, including synchronisation with Starfleet Headquarters,” Data explained.

“Yeah, we had to skip it at Starbase 84 with all of the drive stuff going on,” Geordi added.

“Perfect,” Aisling said. “Take Anna with you.”

“Me?” said Anna, suddenly appearing from behind Data. “Do you need me for something?”

“You are not required for this task but you are welcome to join me if you wish,” Data said, turning towards Anna as she came around to face the group.

“Yeah, only if you want to,” Geordi confirmed. “It’s basic computer core maintenance stuff. Like I said the other day, you can pick and choose your tasks.”

“But you must have some computer core experience from repairing the Baltimore, right?” Aisling nudged.

“Uh, yeah?” Anna replied. “But the Enterprise’s is much bigger. Do I even have security clearance for that?”

“Anna, you have core systems clearance. You had to have that to even get near my baby there,” Geordi said with a grin as he pointed back over his shoulder towards the warp drive. “You have restrictions on what information you can get to within the computer but you have clearance for all hardware on board. I made sure of that.”

“Oh. Okay. I wasn’t sure what to do with myself today anyway because I was feeling kind of...I don’t know, just not great after yesterday.”

“What happened yesterday?” Data asked with a furrowed brow.

“It’s fine,” Geordi quickly interceded. “All taken care of. Nobody’s going to bug you, Anna. You’re welcome to hang out with Data all day if you like.”

Anna smiled widely at Geordi, and then at Data. “I’d like that very much.”

“As would I,” Data said.

Suddenly Anna looked worried again. “Wait, do you mean the cores in the saucer section or the one down here in drive?”

“The upper cores in the saucer section,” Data replied. “However, you need not worry about encountering anyone outside of engineering personnel in core access areas unless something highly unusual occurs.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Geordi confirmed. “We’re parked at a starbase. That’s why we’re doing this work now while we can be hooked up directly. Command folks will be busy with their own stuff.”

“Security will be checking cargo and doing briefings with station personnel,” Aisling said. “In fact, I need to go over there. I’ll see you later, okay Anna?”

“Okay,” Anna said, twisting her fingers a little, but then smiling at Data once more and relaxing.

Aisling shot a grin over Data’s shoulder at Geordi and left.

“Shall we begin?” Data said to Anna. “We can turbolift directly into the systems monitor room and then use the central staircase to reach Deck Eleven’s computer core access walkways. I am reasonably confident you will not have to encounter anyone else today.”

Anna beamed at Data, and they headed out.



Stardate 47247.4 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 07:50) — Deck Five —  
Enterprise Computer Core Systems Monitor Room

“Wow, this is so much bigger than the Baltimore’s computer core,” Anna said reverentially as she and Data entered the systems monitor room atop the infrastructure that extended down to Deck Fourteen. “I mean, I knew it would be but...whoa. Being inside it is different than seeing the specs.”

“Galaxy class computer cores are currently the biggest in the fleet,” Data replied. “However, improvements to isolinear chip technology continue to progress, meaning current plans for subsequent classes may actually end up with smaller physical structures yet increased capacity.”

“That’s been the nature of computers since the earliest ones,” Anna said as she looked-around the room wide-eyed. The lighting was dim, provided mostly by the glowing banks of chips and associated LCARS screens.

“Indeed.”

She turned to him and smiled. "Once upon a time, your brain would have taken rooms and rooms of giant machines."

"That would have made daily activities highly inefficient."

They blinked at each other, and then Anna snorted into a giggle. Data nodded appreciatively at this intended result.

"I have another computational question for you," she said as she leaned to look down one of the four narrow corridors that separated the core into quarters.

"Yes?" Data responded as he began to initiate the testing programs on the central LCARS console.

"Can you measure things just by looking at them?"

"I can provide reasonable estimations."

"But it's not like you have an overlay on your visual field showing you measurements like with a tricorder?"

Data shook his head as he continued to tap the LCARS screen before him. "No. My eyes are more like imaging devices than sensors in that regard."

Anna nodded and moved to peer down another of the four corridors. "I was reading recently about some advances in replacement optical devices for humans and they seem to come with all kinds of nifty capabilities like measuring things, zoom view, stuff like that."

"Yes. Geordi has occasionally considered replacing his VISOR with cybernetic eyes, but I believe the technology does not yet meet with his requirements."

"Yeah, plus it's hard to change what you're used to," Anna said lifting her right leg in the air meaningfully for a moment.

"Indeed."

She moved to the centre of the room with him and then put her right hand out before herself at full arm's length, fingers spread as widely open as she could manage. "I measure things like this. I know the distance between the centres of my thumb tip and pinky tip on this hand is exactly eighteen-point-one centimetres, so I round that to eighteen even. Then if I know the approximate distance between my hand and whatever is in the distant visual

field, I can calculate an estimate of the length of anything I put within this field of view.”

Data’s brow furrowed for a moment, then went up. “Intriguing,” he said, setting down his PADD and lifting his left hand to match her gesture beside her right. He tilted his head for a moment, blinked a few times, and then lowered his hand as he said, “You are employing similar triangles for your estimations. I will consider doing likewise in the future should I not have a tricorder at hand.”

Anna shrugged with a little grin as she dropped her own arm. “I stole the idea from Moana, in a way. She was doing direction more than measurement, though.”

“I am unfamiliar with that individual.”

“She’s a movie character. Maybe that’s the next movie I’ll show you. I was just thinking about it anyway, since Aoife kind of looks like Moana.”

Data nodded. “If you wish. I would like very much to watch another movie with you, and I enjoy learning about your unique perspectives.” He picked his PADD back up, handed her another from the nearby table and said, “Let us begin this task.”



Stardate 47247.8 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 10:48) — Main Engineering

Geordi leaned back in his chair, watching the test output data come across his console as sent by Data from the computer core. The first few detected faults had been minor ones and easily dealt with at Data’s end, so there’d been little for Geordi to do other than ensure all of Data’s work was copied over to the secondary core and backups with the station.

He casually glanced around engineering to check that everything was going smoothly, and it was. Then he noticed Tyler looking at him and smiling brightly, giving him a little wave.

At first Geordi just smiled back politely at her, but then he sighed, sent a quick message to Data that he'd be away from the console momentarily, got up, and went to Tyler's side. "Hey, can I talk to you for a minute about a personal issue?" he asked in as gentle a tone as possible. "If you're not too busy?"

Tyler batted her eyes at him and replied, "I'm never too busy for you, sir."

"Right," he said, trying to hide his discomfort. "Uh...let's find a meeting room."

Tyler nodded and eagerly followed him down the corridor into the same room she'd been in the day before with Anna and Aisling.

"Have a seat," Geordi said as he sat down too, folding his hands on the desk before him. He took a deep breath, hung his head a little, and admitted, "This is hard. I'm trying to make sure I don't hurt your feelings."

"Oh," she said, her grin disappearing entirely.

"Tyler. Andrea?" he tried carefully.

She briefly beamed at him again at the friendly first-name use, but it faded quickly when he continued to appear so solemn.

"Andrea, like I said, this is personal. I'm not your supervisor right now. Just a colleague. And...that's all I am."

She nodded again and quietly said, "You're telling me you're not interested."

Rattled by her sudden arrival at the point he'd been dancing around, he stammered for a moment, then sighed again. "It's just that...well...yeah. Sorry."

"It's okay," she said sadly but resolutely. "I kind of knew. I really knew all along, if I'm honest with myself. I just kept hoping anyway."

Geordi quickly admitted, "And it was wrong of me to let that hope grow. I'm...really bad at this, sorry. I've never had to let anyone else down before. Usually I'm the one being told no."

“I’ve had it both ways, sir. I mean, Geordi.”

“It’s not like there’s anything wrong with you. You are...” He let out an uncomfortable groan. “I want to say a lot of nice things about you now but as I play them in my head, they sound like I’m stringing you along, or worse, when I am your supervisor they’d be way out of bounds.”

“If I may ask, is that the problem? That you’re my supervisor?”

“No. I mean...yeah, a little,” he said uncertainly. “I don’t think I’d be comfortable dating anyone directly under my command. But even if you weren’t, I just...I’m really sorry, but I don’t feel that way about you. I don’t feel that...that spark, that electricity, that...attraction. I just don’t. Sorry.”

Andrea nodded again, and then flatly said, “I find you very attractive.”

Once again thrown off by her bluntness, he stammered for a moment but then said, “Uh, yeah, I can tell. And I’m flattered, truly. But also...”

“Uncomfortable,” she filled in.

“Yeah. It’s getting awkward. Look, I need to be really clear about this but I don’t want to sound mean, but it’s also mean to not be clear so...there is no chance. I am not into you in a romantic context, and I’m not going to change my mind on that. I like you as a colleague. I think you’re great on the team. I want to keep being a colleague and, in time, maybe even friends. But we’re never going to be a couple. Please, Andrea, you need to let that idea go.” He let out a slow breath, feeling utterly wretched but knowing it had to be said.

“Okay,” she said with a small nod.

“Um...okay?” he asked, still shocked at how well she was taking it all.

She let out a frustrated little sigh, rolled her eyes briefly at herself, shrugged, and said, “Like I said, I kind of knew.”

Tentatively he asked, “So...are you? Okay, that is?”

She pressed her lips together in momentary thought, and then said, “I’m a bit bummed right now but I’ll be okay. And I like working with you too. I can be fine with that.”

“Thanks for understanding,” he said in as kind a tone as possible.

“Thank you for being honest with me.”

“Sorry it took so long.”

She shrugged again, a little more sharply this time, though she didn’t seem angry so much as resolved to let it be. “These things happen.”

“For what it’s worth — and I guess I am being a supervisor again a bit here — you can take the shift off if you want. Hell if you need to take a few shifts off, that’s fine.”

She looked to the side for a moment and said, “I’ll think about it.”

Geordi nodded, followed by an awkward silence. Eventually he admitted, “I...uh...I’m not sure what to do or say next.”

Very matter-of-factly, she replied, “Well, speaking as someone who’s been on your side of it, it’s probably best for you to go now and let me have some time to think.”

“Okay, sure. You got it,” he said, standing. “You call on any support you need. I feel weird leaving you alone in here.”

She smiled at him, but for the first time in ages it was simply polite with no hint of flirtatiousness about it. “I’m a big girl, Geordi. Sir. Whatever,” she said with a little laugh. “I can lick my wounds and move on. You can go back to engineering. I’ll be fine. I promise.”

Geordi nodded again, went to the door, and then turned back enough to say, “Sorry again.”

She then fired him an impatient look, so he hurriedly left and returned to his console. He messaged Data that he was back, and noted that nothing of interest had been found in Data’s tests and scans while he was gone.

For about ten minutes he sat there staring at his screen with intense dedication yet seeing hardly any of what scrolled by since

none of it was flagged for attention. He felt bad, yet resolved. He was relieved to have it done with, concerned for Tyler, but also contemplating how maturely and steadfastly she'd handled it. That made him feel worse for not having dealt with it sooner, but impressed with her as a colleague all the more.

When she eventually came back in, she didn't look at him, but simply returned to whatever she'd been working on before. He pretended not to notice the other heads in the room looking at Tyler, glancing at him, and the soft mutterings of gossip here and there.

Within a few minutes more, however, it all evaporated away and everything returned to a normal, professional work day.



Stardate 47247.8 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 11:04) — Deck Eleven  
— Enterprise Computer Core

“Two sections on this level are showing multiple potential faults,” Data said as they entered the computer core room on Deck Eleven.

“That sounds bad,” Anna replied.

“The backups and secondary have been covering for them so there is no immediate danger to ship systems,” Data clarified. “But we should find the issues and rectify them. I will take this panel if you would like to examine that one,” he said, pointing to a chipset across the room and setting his PADD and tricorder down on the counter nearby.

“Sure,” Anna said as she jauntily walked over, lightly humming to herself as she had been for some time.

“What song is in your head now?” Data asked as he accessed the control information on the set he intended to test.

Anna laughed softly.

“Is it from *Moana*?” he guessed.

“Yep,” she replied with a grin as she opened the access panel to expose the chipset’s back plating. “It’s one of my favourites from that movie, sung by the ancestors as they go sailing from island to island to explore and found new colonies.” She glanced at him over her shoulder. “Very Starfleet, actually. But...like...in catchy song.”

“Hm,” he replied, his brows up.

Anna burst into song as she waved her hand around towards the banks upon banks of computational storage around them. “*We are explorers reading every sign! We tell the stories of our elders in a never-ending chain!*” Then she turned back to the access panel as she giggled with a little snort.

As always, that sound did something to Data that he could neither describe nor comprehend, so he said, “I look forward to watching the movie with you at our next opportunity. It sounds fascinating.”

“It’s really good. One of my favourites. I tried to learn the language in this song until I read that it’s actually an amalgamation of...oh! Ew! Gross!”

Data turned towards her. “The song is now disgusting you?”

“No, it’s the sticky-crusty-crud at the back of this panel.”

Data frowned and his brow furrowed as he crossed the room to peer over her shoulder. As she had described, a strange substance appeared to be leaking down the rear portion of the unit, with sections of it dried to a crust.

“Hm,” he said. “Do not touch it. It may be corrosive. That would explain the readings of potential faults that have not yet come to fruition.”

“I’m naive about a lot of things but don’t worry, I know better than to stick my fingers into random space crust-goo.” She pulled a face and made a mild mock-gagging noise.

Data turned again and crossed the room to retrieve his tricorder.

Anna peered at the substance more closely, and then at the small readout panel to the side. “Whoa, this here is saying the power conduit behind there is —”

The panel exploded.

Anna screamed and threw her arms up to shield her face as the blast knocked her to the ground.

The fire suppression system engaged automatically, quickly shutting down the small but extremely dangerous jet of plasma erupting out of the conduit, through the chipset, and into the room.

Data dropped the tricorder to the floor as he hurried to Anna's side and called out, "Computer, report explosion of indeterminate origin to engineering."

*"Report already in progress,"* the computer replied.

Anna whimpered as she sat up with Data's assistance, cradling her left arm. "I'm okay, I'm okay," she said hurriedly.

"You are injured," Data replied firmly.

"Yeah, and it hurts. A lot. But..." she took a deep breath in and let it slowly out. "I'm okay. I'm fine. Oh, I think it got my head a little bit?"

"You appear to have a small burn on your forehead and into your scalp. Some hair has been singed, but that injury appears minor compared to your arm."

They both looked at her arm; it was bad, as plasma burns always were. Multiple layers of skin and muscle had been profoundly damaged along the outside of her forearm, primarily from about halfway down to the edge of her wrist. Her sleeve was fused to her skin around the edges of the burn.

"It's um...it could have been worse," Anna said. "I think the jet was really narrow. Ow. But also...kind of no ow? Uh, I think this should hurt even worse than it does."

"That frequently indicates severe burn damage," Data said, helping her to her feet. "Fortunately we are directly above sickbay. We can go out that corridor and down the central stairs —"

"No!" Anna shouted in sudden panic. "No way! That is...I don't need sickbay. I can treat this myself. I've treated plenty of my own burns before."

"Anna, this wound is significant. Standard protocol requires that I escort you to sickbay."

“No. I’m not going there.”

Data blinked for a moment, and then recalled the likely reason for her reticence. “I will stay with you. Sickbay on board the Enterprise is a safe place. You will not be harmed. I can guarantee that with absolute certainty. Doctor Crusher is — ”

Anna shook her head and backed away from him in fear. “No. No doctors, no sickbay.”

Geordi’s voice came over Data’s combadge. “*Data? What the hell is going on? Are you two okay?*”

Data replied, “We observed an unknown substance. Shortly thereafter an EPS conduit behind a chip panel ruptured. The section has been shut down and the fire contained. Anna has received a burn injury to her arm. I will escort her to sickbay shortly. Please send an investigation and repair crew.”

“*Damn!*” Geordi shouted. “*How bad is she?*”

“I will attend to her,” Data said firmly. “She will be fine after treatment. Data out.” He tapped his badge and said in a gentler tone to Anna, “Please come with me to sickbay.”

She shook her head, tears starting to form at the sides of her eyes. “I can’t, Data. I can’t. Just help me to my quarters. I’ve got a dermal regenerator. I can treat myself.”

“Your injury is too severe for self-treatment.”

“Then...help me with it in my quarters,” she pleaded.

He could see her whole body beginning to shiver, but he could not tell if it was injury shock or terror at the notion of going to sickbay. He held out both hands towards her and took a slow step. “Anna, you are unwell. I do not wish to see your injury compounded. Doctor Crusher is aware of your...unique history with a sickbay environment. She will provide ample support and kindness. I am certain of this.”

The tears began to spill down her cheeks, cutting through the layer dust from the explosion and fire suppression. “I’m afraid,” she said in a tiny, soft voice.

“I know. I can see that. I will not leave your side.” He took a step closer and reached out towards her right hand. “Take my hand.

I will guide you down the stairs. You can lean on me as much as you require. You will be all right. You are not alone.”

Something in those words made her cry more, but also prompted her to tentatively take his offered hand. He moved to her side so he could support her should she lose her balance, and then gently guided her towards the stairs.

When they emerged into the fore end of the central corridor on Deck Twelve, Anna sniffed the air and faltered, leaning heavily against him. As he pondered picking her up, she took in a ragged breath and righted herself, so he stepped towards the short corridor that led towards Crusher’s office and the primary ICU.

But Anna stood firm, once more shaking her head.

“You are safe here,” Data tried to say reassuringly, but Anna took a step backwards instead, stretching their joined arms between them, cradling her injured arm against her body.

“Please, no,” she whimpered.

Her abundantly observable terror concerned him greatly, and he was uncertain how to convince her that nobody in this sickbay meant her harm. He was aware that humans could be incapacitated by previous trauma, and began to suspect Anna was experiencing this phenomenon.

Once more he said, “I will stay with you. Please come with me.”

A sob shook her, and she made a terrible, child-like squeak of strangled terror. It occurred to Data that since the sound of her laughter had become favourite sound, this noise was a contender for the worst sound he had ever heard.

“Please,” she whispered in a hoarse voice, as if it was difficult to even speak. “Please don’t make me.”

“I do not wish to make you do anything. I only wish to obtain the medical assistance you require.”

“Please,” she repeated, pulling back against his hand. “I’ll be good. I’ll be good. Don’t hurt me.”

Data’s brow furrowed deeply. “I would never intentionally harm you. Anna, nobody here will harm you.”

“I’ll be good, I’ll be good, I’ll be good,” she began repeating in a whisper, the words running together as she crouched against the wall, pulling his arm with all her weight.

Data could not fathom what “being good” had to do with anything in this situation, but he was able to recognise someone in crisis when he saw it. He tapped his combadge and said, “Data to Doctor Crusher.”



Stardate 47247.8 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 11:18) — Deck Twelve  
— Sickbay

Beverly sat at her desk, reading reports from Starfleet Medical that updated the latest treatment guidance for several conditions she knew multiple crew members to have. She was about to make notations their individual files when Data’s voice came over her combadge.

*“Data to Doctor Crusher.”*

“Yes Data? What can I do for you?” she responded cheerily.

*“I am in the corridor between your office and the central staircase. I require your assistance immediately, please.”*

She stood up with urgent concern. “What’s wrong?”

*“I am here with a burn victim who is unable to enter sickbay, but requires approach with extreme caution. It is Specialist Anna White.”*

A chill ran through her, and her heart began to pound. She’d prepared herself in case White ever needed emergency treatment; what she’d say, how she’d mitigate the young lady’s existing medical trauma, rolling around possibilities in her mind in advance to reduce any likelihood of furthering the poor thing’s unhappy relationship with Starfleet medicine.

“On my way,” she replied as she hurried out the door.

As soon as she rounded the short corridor's corner, she saw Data standing on the opposite side, his arm stretched out and holding a hand of someone hiding behind that corner. She tapped off her combadge and took a deep breath.

"I'm here," she called out clearly but in as soft a tone as possible. "It's going to be okay."

She then almost said the standard line everyone in Starfleet Medical was trained to say to all emergency patients — "I'm going to take good care of you," — but remembered in time to bite her tongue on that reflex. Another chill ran through her as she recalled evidence she wish she'd never witnessed of Loxos repeatedly using that phrase as he'd assaulted Anna. With another deep breath to calm herself, she instead called out, "You're safe here. I promise I will always keep you safe. You can come out."

The joined arms went slightly slack, so Data stepped towards the corner. From between his arm and the bulkhead peered half of a pale, terrified face, staring at Crusher with a tumultuous mix of terror and defiance.

Crusher immediately lifted both of her empty hands in placation. "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. I will never, ever hurt you." She slowly approached as the young woman moved further behind Data, still gripping his hand. "You can hang onto Data as long as you like."

"Yes," Data confirmed. "I have promised to stay with her as long as she wishes."

"Good," Beverly said. "That's really good. Does it help to hold onto him?"

Anna flicked her eyes to Data but then immediately back to Crusher, staring at her approach like a wounded animal watches a predator.

Crusher stopped but kept her hands up. "I know you're frightened, and I know why. You don't have to explain it to me. I also know you don't want to go into sickbay, and you probably don't have to." She asked Data, "Where's the burn?"

“Primarily on her left arm,” he replied. “With a small additional burn on her forehead.”

Only then did Crusher note that Anna was hiding her left arm behind herself. She asked Anna, “Can I see it? I’ll stay right here for now. Can you show me?”

Anna looked to Data again, and he nodded at her encouragingly, so she brought her left arm out into view.

Crusher nodded. “Thank you. That looks pretty painful, but it doesn’t look so bad that you need to be on a biobed. That means you don’t need to go back there at all,” she said, pointing behind herself towards the primary ICU. “We can go to another room, one without any beds or anything medical-looking. She pointed towards the corridor Anna had just been hiding in. “There’s a lab down there that should be empty, just tables and chairs and general equipment cabinets. Nothing scary, nothing threatening, but a place we can sit and I can have a better look at that. Is that okay?”

Again, Anna turned to Data. He said to her, “I believe I know which room Doctor Crusher means. It is a general-purpose medical science room for visiting researchers. It does not resemble the ICU.”

Anna’s shoulders hunched defensively, but she allowed Data to guide her towards the room, so Beverly followed at a careful distance.

Once they were all in the spartan room, Beverly went to one of the cabinets and retrieved a nanite-infused, anti-infection towel. She spread it over one of the narrow tables and said, “Here. Let’s get you sitting here and you can put your arm on this. It’s soft. Let’s get you comfortable.” She indicated to Data with a head nod to pull a chair up and direct Anna towards it. He then pulled up a secondary chair so he could sit beside her and allow her to comfortably continue holding his hand.

Beverly pulled over a rolling chair to the end of the table so she was close to the injured left arm but not too close to Anna otherwise. She could see Anna shaking, and did not yet dare touch

her. "Can you turn it just a little towards me?" she asked gently. When Anna complied, she nodded. "Okay. Are you feeling cold?"

Anna made no reply, but looked at her blankly.

Beverly nodded again, stood, went to a different cupboard, and pulled out a self-heating blanket. She approached Anna cautiously and said, "I'm going to spread this over your lap, okay? Just to keep you warm. It's nice and comforting. You can remove it any time you want to."

Again Anna made no reply, but neither did she make any defensive movements against the offer, so Beverly had Data help her spread the blanket over Anna's legs. "That's just to help you relax. Everything's going to be okay." She stood fully again. "I'm going to go back into sickbay for a moment to get a burn kit and some other things I need. I'll be right back." She pointed to the door. "That door is not locked. You can leave if you need to, do you understand? You are not being held in here. You have total freedom to get up and go any time you want. The only thing I ask is if you feel like you have to leave, please stay with Data. Don't go off alone. Okay?"

Anna glanced at Data but remained otherwise silent.

Data nodded at the doctor and said, "I will remain with Anna at all times."

Beverly smiled at him, thinking how sweet that would seem under other circumstances. But nothing about this situation was sweet; in fact, it was overwhelming even to her as an experienced trauma doctor. "I'll be right back," she said softly, and then stepped out the door.

In the corridor, she took a ragged breath and leaned against the bulkhead for a moment, her head swimming with the emotional weight. She closed her eyes, giving her mind a chance to race through the superfluous and distracting elements of it all: this was possibly Picard's daughter, the one he'd told her looked like his mother, her eyes the same colour as his, eyes filled with ferocity and fear. A young woman harmed by every medical entity she'd come into contact with. An effectively orphaned crash victim. A

rape victim. An involuntary mental health incarcerated victim for reasons later revealed to be both abusive and lacking in any medical or scientific validity. So much need, so much lack of support.

*I am going to be that support from now until I die*, Beverly thought, surprising herself with the immediacy and intensity of her own conviction.

She righted herself, took a cleansing breath, straightened her lab coat, and strode off towards sickbay to get the tools she needed to help this girl in a first step towards building trust and the sort of long-term nurturing relationship Beverly could sense was direly needed.



Stardate 47247.8 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 11:28) — Bridge

Picard, Riker, and Troi were idly chatting about the forthcoming Cairn delegation when La Forge burst onto the bridge from the turbolift and ran to one of the rear engineering stations.

The three turned to look at him. “Problem, Mr. La Forge?” Picard asked.

“Yes sir,” La Forge replied in a tone that indicated he was not fully paying attention to command staff, but rather whatever engineering task he was deeply engaged with.

“Care to let us in on it?” Riker asked with the slightest edge of warning.

La Forge didn’t reply at first, but then seemed to suddenly notice that he was being asked a question. “Uh...” he said in frustration, then turned to look down over the tactical console at the people below. “Sorry, it’s just...putting out literal fires, Commander.”

“What?!” Picard asked as he stood, with Riker and Troi following suit. He turned briefly to the ensign at the ops station,

who in turn hurriedly scanned her console. “We hadn’t heard about any fire.”

“No sir, you wouldn’t get a notification up here yet because it was...” he trailed off as he turned back to the engineering console and rapidly hit a series of commands. “Sorry, sir, I’m distracted. We...we’re doing the computer core inspection and backup so it’s all hooked up to the station and alarms to the bridge temporarily offline or else there’d be constant warnings that someone’s messing with the core, because we’re messing with the core. But don’t worry...” he said, trailing off for a moment again and shifting to the other engineering console to his right. “My board lit up with it. We’re on it. Fire’s out, automatic suppression took care of it, I have a crew on site investigating.”

“What the hell happened?” Riker asked.

“Still working that out,” La Forge replied. “Data saw it happen and he said there was some weird substance and then an EPS blowout.”

“Is Data or anyone else hurt?” Troi asked.

“Data’s fine. Anna was with him. She got some kind of burn on her arm or something.”

Picard’s jaw went tight. Troi noticed his immediate fear. They looked at each other briefly, but said nothing.

La Forge continued, “He took her to sickbay and as far as I know they’re still there. She’s got that whole fear of sickbay thing so I think he’s staying with her.” He tapped some more keys, then sighed with relief. “Okay. That’s got that. It’s under control. I need to go back and meet with my team. I’ll get you an update when I can.”

“Wait!” Picard said, a little too abruptly. He quickly recovered and added more calmly, “How badly is she hurt?”

“I don’t know, but Data hasn’t filed a casualty report yet. He said something about it not being too bad. He’s probably busy keeping her company. Telling her jokes or something to keep her happy. Sorry, you’ll have to check with sickbay if you want more

information right now. I'll try to see what's up later but I've got to get with the team in the core."

"That's fine, go," Riker said.

La Forge nodded and then hurried away.

"Well that was dramatic," Riker muttered. He went up the ramp to the engineering stations. "But it looks like he's got it all under control."

Picard went to peer at the ops console over the ensign's shoulder. "Indeed. We have full function on the main core?"

"Yes sir," the ensign replied.

Picard turned to Troi and they looked at each other in shared helplessness, each knowing they could not dare to go to sickbay for answers, but both also knowing that Crusher would update them whenever she could.



Stardate 47247.9 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 11:31) — Deck Twelve  
— Sickbay

Crusher rushed into sickbay calling out, "Alyssa!"

The nurse replied, "Yes Doctor?" and hurried to her side.

Crusher took a deep breath and then whispered, "Data just brought me Anna White with severe plasma burns on her arm. I've got her in one of the spare labs."

Ogawa blinked for a moment, and then realised what that meant. "Oh! You want me to initiate your protocol for her?"

"Not yet. I think I can take care of her well enough in there. I need a stand for my tricorder and a burn kit."

"Right away, Doctor."

Crusher went directly to the medical replicator. "I'm getting her some additional pain and anti-emetic hypos."

Ogawa brought a tray with the requested items, and Crusher added the hypos to it.

“I can carry this over for you,” Ogawa offered.

“No, that’s fine, thank you, I’ve got it. In case we do need to initiate that protocol, get everything ready. Let Doctor Aishatu know, and redirect any comms for me to her unless there’s an override. I don’t want any interruptions unless it’s an emergency bigger than this.”

“Understood, Doctor.”

“But be ready in case I need to have Data carry her in here.”

“Got it.”

Crusher cocked her head to the side and confided in Ogawa, as she often did, “There’s a fire in that girl’s eyes, Alyssa. I’m hopeful it’s going to hold her upright until I’m done.”

“I hope she’s okay,” the nurse said with an encouraging little smile.

Crusher nodded. “I intend to see that she is.” With that, she hurried back out of sickbay.



Stardate 47247.9 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 11:35) — Deck Twelve  
— Room 3481

As Crusher entered the lab, Data looked to her as if he intended to get up and assist her even though he was still holding Anna’s hand. Crusher shook her head at him. “I’m fine, Data, you stay right where you are. You are doing a very important job right now.”

“Yes Doctor,” Data dutifully replied.

The fire Crusher had mentioned in Anna’s eyes was still very much there as the young lady watched the doctor set the tray on a nearby table and roll closer to her on a stool. *That’s fine*, she thought. *You use all of that fury as fuel and watch my every move as I show you that you trust me.*

Crusher smiled at Anna sympathetically and began to speak to her in the soothing, gentle tones that she usually reserved for children or refugees. “Okay. We have a lot to do here and usually I’d have at least one nurse helping me, but I want to keep things calm and slow for you, so we three are going to work together to get you patched up.

“First thing’s first: you’re looking a little green around the gills, so is it okay if I give you this hypo?” she said leaning over to lift one from the tray. “It’s a simple, mild, anti-nausea medicine. It won’t make you sleepy or do anything else but settle your stomach. You don’t have to have it, but I think it’s a good idea to help keep your system relaxed so you can stay sitting here in full control.”

Anna looked to the hypo, and then scrutinised Crusher once more. Without a word, she tilted her head just enough to indicate that she was willing to accept the hypo.

Crusher whispered, “Good job,” as she leaned forward and administered it. “Better?”

Anna shrugged slightly, then nodded a little. She turned to Data with a meaningful look for a moment, then watched Crusher carefully again.

Data said, “I believe Anna wishes me to tell you that she often experiences nausea from stress.”

Anna looked down in embarrassment, but nodded.

Crusher blinked in astonishment. *They have that deep an unspoken communication already?!* she thought. Though she was tempted to wonder about their relationship, she made herself focus again in deciding to make good use of this surprising information.

“That’s good to know, thank you, Data. Anna, that’s not unusual. You don’t need to be embarrassed about that, or about being afraid of sickbay. Lots of people with far less medical trauma than you are afraid of doctors and sickbay. That’s why I try to make things as friendly as I can,” she said, reaching into one of her pockets and pulling out a silver rod with a blue light on the end. “This is my favourite dermal regenerator. I don’t know why, it just

is. But to make sure everyone knows this is my favourite and to set folks at ease, look what I put on it.”

Crusher held up the tool so Anna could see a sparkly cartoon cat sticker affixed to one side of the handle.

The merest flash of interest passed over Anna’s face, prompting Crusher to think, *Aha, you like sparkles and kitty cats. Somehow I knew you would. My foot’s in the door now.*

Crusher leaned a little closer and whispered conspiratorially, “I have more stickers back in my office if you want some later. And lollipops. Lots of goodies. No age limit for joy.”

For a moment Anna perked up in interest, but then narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

*Okay, classic traumatised, distrustful child reaction. Got it,* Crusher thought and sat back. “Maybe later. For now I want you to know that if you can’t speak, that’s fine. Totally normal reaction to stress. We can find other ways for you to communicate with me. It does seem like Data understands you pretty well. Is it okay if I ask him to answer some questions?”

Anna looked to Data, who nodded encouragingly at her, so Anna nodded to Crusher in turn.

“Thank you,” she said to Anna, and then asked Data, “How did this burn happen?”

“An unanticipated EPS rupture while we were working in the computer core. Anna lifted her arms to shield herself from the plasma jet and was knocked to the floor as a result,” Data explained.

“Got it. Any other burns?” Crusher asked both of them.

Data replied, “There is also the aforementioned small one on her forehead.”

Crusher leaned to look and Anna turned her head obligingly. “Right. We’ll get to that one in a bit. Anything on your right arm?”

Anna lifted her right arm a little, still gripping Data’s hand tightly. The fabric was singed but appeared to be intact.

“Okay, that’s good. For your left arm then, can you tell me how much pain you’re in?”

When Anna didn't speak, Data replied, "She said at the time that the outer parts were quite painful, but the deeper part of the burn was not. I am concerned about significant nerve damage."

Crusher nodded. "That's fine, I can fix that too. You're going to be okay, Anna. I'm going to get you all patched up, I promise. But you're in control. I'm going to tell you everything before I do it and you get to say no to anything you don't want, do you understand?"

Anna nodded, but appeared unconvinced.

"You're safe here. I will never harm you. Data's with you and he'll always keep you safe too. Data's just like that," she said with a warm smile.

"Thank you, Doctor," he replied.

"He's a good friend, isn't he?" Crusher asked Anna. "He's one of my favourite people."

Data's brow went up. Again he said, "Thank you, Doctor. I value your friendship as well."

"See? We're all friends in here. Okay, I'd like to give you this next," she said, retrieving the next hypo on the tray. "This is a pain block. I want to give it to you in your upper arm to numb everything from there down. That's all it does; no other effects, no drowsiness, no paralysis, nothing. It'll make it so I can treat you without causing you more pain. Is that all right?"

Anna nodded, so Crusher administered the hypo through her sleeve. The immediate effect was obvious; Anna's breathing and posture relaxed, and her white-knuckled grip on Data's hand softened as well.

"Yeah, I think you were sitting there bearing a lot of pain. It's going to be okay now. That'll last for about four hours, well after we're done. So I want you to go really easy on that arm after, okay? If you're used to using both arms to get around when your prosthetic leg is off, try to avoid that for a bit, especially if it's still numb. Let's not add a fall on top of the burn. Okay?"

Anna nodded.

“Right. Next I’m going to take a scan of your arm with my tricorder, and then set it up on a stand beside us here to keep an eye on your vitals. It won’t touch you. You probably know that already, but I’m making it clear.”

Anna nodded again, and allowed Crusher to proceed.

Once the scan was complete and tricorder on the stand, Crusher pointed to the case on the tray. “That’s a burn kit. It’s got several tools in it to help me get this cleaned up, and then I can use my dermal regenerator to fix everything. But I have a feeling you know all of that too, because I’m betting you had to fix your own burns all those years taking care of yourself, didn’t you?”

Anna looked briefly startled at Crusher’s guess, then ashamed again.

Crusher smiled warmly at her. “Nothing to be embarrassed about. You took very good care of yourself. I’m so impressed with you.”

Anna’s eyes widened in wonder for a moment, and Crusher instantly recognised the expression of a young person desperate for approval, so she continued, “In fact I bet you have your own medical tricorder in your quarters and are so used to taking care of your own injuries that you wanted to fix this yourself too. And you know what? I bet you could’ve done a decent job of it. But I’m so proud of you for coming here instead so I can help you with this. You are so brave, so strong.”

Anna bit her lip and appeared to be holding back tears, so Crusher eased off. “I’m going to prove to you that you were right to come to me. Can I put my hand over your hand and wrist just to hold it still?”

Anna gasped and pulled her injured arm back a little, the cloth underneath sliding back with her.

Crusher sat back and lifted her hands in placation. “Okay, okay, easy now. I don’t have to do that if you don’t want.” She glanced to Data.

Data hesitated, but then said, “Anna prefers not to have her left hand touched in general. I do not know why.”

Anna's face went red, and Crusher could see on the tricorder that she was experiencing significant stress about it. But before she could inquire further, Anna took in a ragged breath, sat up very tall, and resolutely slid her arm back towards Crusher.

"You're sure?" Crusher asked.

Anna nodded, still visibly upset, but acquiescing nonetheless.

"Like I said, a very brave young lady. Okay, I'm going to gently hold your arm just turned to the side a bit. Any time you need to pull away, you do it. I'm not holding you down." More emphatically she added, "I will never, ever hold you down in any way. I promise. Do you understand?"

They stared at each other for a moment as Crusher thought, *I know Loxos strapped you down. That will never happen to you again, not in my sickbay, not for any reason.*

Anna nodded slowly, and relaxed once more, allowing the doctor to begin work on the wound.

# CHAPTER TEN

Stardate 47247.9 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 11:45) — Bridge

La Forge returned to the bridge, this time much more calmly. “I have more information for you, Captain,” he said.

“Go ahead, report,” Picard replied.

“We still have some more tests to run to be sure, but our current theory is that during the interphasic worm attacks at Starbase 84, one of those bugs got onto a *Tonidua* nesting spider in the chipset above the one that had the EPS rupture.”

“But those spiders are tiny and harmless,” Riker said.

“Yeah, they are, which is why even though we get rid of them when we find them, we don’t go hunting them all down,” La Forge explained. “Plus there’s an argument for keeping things around that don’t hurt humanoids but eat other things that might. So anyway there was one in its little nest tucked up in the panel of the computer core, and we think one of those interphasic worms ended up on it and killed it before we got rid of those. Our scans show interphasic properties inside the residue of the spider and nest that dripped down, and in greater quantities than the mass of the spider and its nest alone should have produced. So we think that some kind of fusion occurred, and that resulted in a corrosive substance that’s been leaking down behind the chipset, up against the EPS conduit.”

“So when Data opened it for the inspection, it ruptured?” Riker guessed.

“Yeah, except it wasn’t Data on that one. It was Anna. Oh and I checked with sickbay, Crusher’s got them both in a side room, according to Ogawa. She confirmed it’s just an arm burn. It looks like Anna opened the panel and whether it was the movement of parts or unlucky chance or whatever, it blew. Fire suppression

kicked in, the damage is minimal, and we've almost got it repaired so we can get back to the inspection and backup."

"The inspection was overdue, correct?" Riker said.

"Yes sir, sorry about that. It's why we were doing it now, because with everything that went on at 84, we couldn't do it then. And to be honest, by the look of this damage, we might not have found it on the first day. There's a weird reaction going on. All of the samples have already been sent to Lieutenant Choi's lab. She's...extremely excited."

Riker grinned. "I bet. Weird bio-reactions are her thing."

"Exactly," La Forge said. "She can have them. I don't like bio crud in my engineering systems. Anyway, the situation is stable. I'll make sure everything's reported up formally later, but I want to get the backup and inspections back on track."

"Presumably you are checking the entire core for more of these spiders and residue?" Picard said.

"Better than that, sir. We've got a joint biology-engineering team scanning the whole ship for anything else that might've been missed. You should be getting a lot of reports by late this evening, Captain."

"Very good, Mr. La Forge. Continue," he said with a formal little nod.

"Thank you, sir," La Forge said, and then left once more.

Troi very carefully said to Picard, "It sounds like everything and everyone will be all right."

"Indeed, Counselor. Indeed." He let out a long, slow sigh and sat back in his seat.



“You are doing so well,” Crusher said to Anna as she finished using a series of surgical tools on the deepest part of the wound. “Don’t you agree, Data?”

“Yes,” Data said. When Anna turned to him he said, “You are doing very well.”

There was very nearly a hint of a smile towards him before Anna turned back to watch Crusher intently.

“Some people can’t stand to watch a procedure done on themselves,” Crusher said as she continued. “And others are deeply curious about everything. I can tell which kind of person you are.” She glanced up to say, “I like curious people.”

With every compliment, Anna visibly relaxed more and more. Soon Crusher was finished repairing all of the underlying layers of tissue. She sat back, lifted her sticker-adorned dermal regenerator again, and said, “Time for this in a minute, but let’s let that first pass settle a little first. We’re almost done, though, so if it’s okay I’d like to make a deal with you.”

Both Anna and Data tilted their heads in curiosity at the same time, prompting Crusher to let out a tiny chuckle. She continued, “I know you don’t ever want to go into sickbay and I know why,” she said in a more serious tone. “You never have to explain any of that to me or justify why you feel that way. I get it. So here’s the deal: if you need medical attention for anything, you can call me to wherever you are and if I’m available I’ll come to you right away. If I’m not available and it can’t wait I’ll send one of my staff. They’re all very good good people, I promise. I’ll only send women, okay? But if I can come or it can wait, I’ll see you myself, anywhere, any time of day or night. I don’t make that offer to just anyone, you know. I’d never get any sleep! But this is important. You’re important,” she said emphatically.

Anna blurted, “Why?”

Crusher was taken aback at suddenly hearing Anna speak. “Because...because you are. You just are. With all you’ve been through, you deserve a bit of extra kindness and attention. So if you need me, you call me, got it? I mean it, even if it’s the middle

of the night. I'll sleep better knowing you'll call me for help instead of trying to treat yourself somewhere all alone. And it doesn't even have to be medical. If you just need someone to talk to, you can call me. Looks like you've got a pretty reliable friend in Data here but if he's not available and you need someone, you are not alone."

Anna bit her lip again, her eyes once more wide and teary.

"I know that's a big thing to hear. But I mean it. I'm here for you," she said, emphasising every word. She picked up the dermal regenerator and started sweeping it over the remnants of the wound. "But the other side of the deal is this: if you're ever extremely ill or injured so badly so that I need a biobed for you, I need you to agree to let me take you into the ICU. I absolutely swear to you that I will never, ever make you go in there unless it's a life-or-death situation. I really want you to trust me on that, which is why I'm willing to do everything else anywhere you're comfortable. But I can't let you risk your life just to stay out of sickbay, even with all of your entirely justified reasons to want to stay away."

Crusher set down the regenerator. "There, all done. It's going to be tender until tomorrow so take it easy, like I said earlier, even after the pain block wears off. Doctor's orders. But do we have a deal?"

Anna withdrew her arm slowly to her chest and shrugged.

Crusher suggested, "Of course the best option is to avoid getting sick or hurt in the first place. But things happen. I promise you can trust me to do what's best for you, but I need you to learn to trust me. Only you can do that."

Anna turned to Data, who said, "Doctor Crusher will always take good care of you."

Anna winced slightly, so Crusher quickly said, "Not with those words. Don't worry, you won't hear those words."

Anna relaxed, but Data's brow furrowed in confusion.

"I think for now you should go back to your quarters and rest. Drink some water when you feel up to it, and eat later if you can."

Anna nodded.

Data said, "I will help you to your quarters, if you wish."

All three stood, but Anna wobbled a bit, prompting Data to hold her right arm more closely.

Crusher picked up her tricorder, swept the sensor over Anna again, and said, "I admit, I don't love sending you off like this, but it's part of the deal. Actually, I'm going to send a program for a nutritional supplement to the replicator in your quarters. It's tiny, flavourless, and melts on your tongue in seconds. It is not a dietary replacement, understood? But when you feel queasy like this, it'll keep up your basic nutrients and electrolytes. I'll send instructions with the packet."

Anna nodded, and the three made careful progress towards the door.

"And if it's okay, I'd like to come check on you later this evening, unless you're asleep, in which case I'll check on you first thing in the morning," Crusher said as they stepped out into the corridor.

Anna nodded sheepishly.

"It's okay. You've been amazing. Go rest," Crusher said gently. "Call me if you need me at all, got it?"

Anna nodded yet again, and she and Data turned to go to the nearest turbolift. But then Anna stopped suddenly, turned, and said, "Doctor Crusher?"

Crusher replied, "Yes?"

Anna looked near to tears again. "I'm sorry."

Crusher hurried closer. "Sorry? You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I'm sorry for...how I am."

Very carefully, Crusher raised a hand to Anna's left shoulder. "It's okay. I understand. This has been so hard, but again, you've been absolutely wonderful. I'm so glad I finally got to meet you, even if it wasn't in the best of circumstances. Data's going to help you now, and then you're going to rest, and everything's going to be okay," she said as she rubbed Anna's shoulder gently.

Anna seemed dubious about that last claim, but nodded one more time and then allowed Data to lead her away.



Stardate 47248.0 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 12:10) — Deck Thirty-One — Room 5334, Anna's Quarters

Anna kept a tight grip on Data's hand until they both entered her quarters, at which point she let go and hurried to her little couch, curling herself back into its left corner.

Data ordered a glass of water from the replicator, followed by a search to see if Doctor Crusher had sent the nutritional supplement program as mentioned. It was indeed available, so he summoned forth a small box that contained the little tablets and an instruction page. He then set both the water and box on the room's central table, within reach of the couch should Anna wish to easily retrieve either item.

Anna looked at him with clear anguish, yet mustered a tiny, brief smile of gratitude. Data nodded in reply, but was uncertain what to do next. He observed that she had her arms wrapped around herself tightly, so he asked, "Are you cold? Do you wish me to bring you a blanket?"

Anna shook her head. "No, I'm not cold. I'm...embarrassed. For how I behaved in front of the doctor. I was so...childish."

"I do not believe Doctor Crusher regards you negatively in any way." His brow furrowed. "I admit, of all the human emotions, embarrassment confuses me the most. You all tell each other regularly not to be embarrassed for things that you are all embarrassed about yourselves."

Anna let out a little wry chuckle. "Yeah, I've noticed that too. It's weird."

"I am entirely certain that Doctor Crusher is — at this very moment — in her office entering patient treatment notes and

worrying about you. She is no doubt hoping you are able to relax and understand that she only wishes to care for you. There is no need for embarrassment.”

“She seems nice. You were right,” Anna admitted with a sigh.

“I apologise for taking you to sickbay against your will. It was not my intention to upset you or provoke any traumatic memories.”

Anna shook her head again and shrugged. “It’s okay. You were right about the whole thing. I’m just...messed up.”

“You have had a series of unpleasant experiences that make your opinion of sickbay understandable. You are not ‘messed up’. You are human. It is a good thing to be human, even if it is...messy.”

She chuckled briefly again. Then she closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the couch. “I just want it all to go away; all the pain and terror and bad memories. I want to be free of it all, but it sticks to me so hard.”

Data nodded, uncertain how to reply. He experienced a strong drive to offer her a hug because that would be his standard reaction to many other friends in similar distress. The way she held herself made him even more certain that what she required was precisely that sort of friendly affection. He had observed that many humanoids as well as other animals thrived within particular parameters of readily available physical kindness. Even Spot — temperamental as she could be — required petting and cuddles, albeit on her own schedule.

He had been of the opinion for some time that Anna was in deficit of the amount of affection her personality indicated was likely required. Since the early days of her arrival on board the Enterprise, he had watched her observe the physical interactions of others. He had conversed with her about the difficulties in understanding social parameters regarding interpersonal touch. He was certain that she longed for it, but did not know how to go about obtaining it in a way that she deemed safe.

He also knew why this was the case and why she specifically had banned hugs. Between what she had told him in story

fragments across many conversations and what he had read about her in media coverage of her story, he knew that her first reaction upon being beamed onto Loxos' ship was to hop to him and embrace him, excited beyond measure to finally see another living person after so long on Covaris Two alone.

He also knew that Loxos immediately used that hug against her, applying a paralytic hypospray so that he could then carry her to his sickbay where he proceeded to assault and torture her for weeks until she fought her way off to escape.

Further, Data knew that Loxos attempted to use that hug against her later once again during his court case, claiming that the hug had communicated consent. The court refused to accept this ridiculous assertion, but something of it had clearly infiltrated Anna's mind on a deep level, rendering the mere thought of hugging anyone else as a potential threat.

Thus — though she sat on the couch in what Data deemed as clear need of an offer of a hug or perhaps even a shoulder to cry on — he knew that offer would likely be rebuffed or worse, frighten her, adding to the significant stress of the trip to sickbay. This bothered him, as he considered it profoundly unjust that Anna should have to continue to suffer lack of medical and personal support because of what had been done to her.

It occurred to him that that was likely the true wound of villainy: that victims continued to suffer the pain of what was done to them well beyond what any civilised punishment could do to the villains themselves.

Data did not like this realisation at all, and less still his inability to do anything to repair the situation.

Anna opened her eyes again and looked at him tiredly. "I'll be okay. Thank you for being there for me, Data. It means a lot."

"I wish to do more," he replied earnestly.

"You held my hand the whole time. You probably should have been with the engineering team fixing whatever went wrong, but you stayed with me. I don't think there's much more anyone could do. You're the nicest person I know."

“There are plenty of engineers available to assess and repair the issue. My focus is on your needs.”

She smiled at him weakly. “I think you fixed my needs plenty by staying by my side like that. I couldn’t speak. You spoke for me. You...” she started to weep, and lifted her right hand to brush her tears away.

Data immediately located a box of tissues nearby and handed it to her.

She laughed a little again, took the box, and said, “Yeah. Like that. You’re very, very good for me. Thank you. But I think I might need to have a cry on my own for a bit.”

Data did not wish to leave, but as per his previous promise to honour any of her requests to be alone as a code for her need to vomit due to stress, he said, “Understood. If you are going to be sick, is there anything I can do before I go? Perhaps get you some sort of container?”

“Oh no, it’s not that,” she said. “I didn’t eat anything this morning so there’s nothing to throw up. I’m just so tired and embarrassed and want to cry without an audience. And I’m feeling guilty about whatever went wrong in the core so it’d make me feel better if I knew you were going to go help them figure out what happened.”

Data nodded, though he did not want to leave her. “As per our previous discussion, should I come check on you later?”

“Um...I don’t know right now. I guess Doctor Crusher said she wants to do that too. How about if you figure out what that crusty goop was and how it exploded, you can come tell me that later?”

Data nodded again. “I will do that. Please do not hesitate to call on me to return if you require further assistance. Or Doctor Crusher.”

“Okay, I promise I’ll call if I need help.”

Data turned and reluctantly left. He then stood outside her door, experiencing a significant desire to immediately go back in and offer her that hug and shoulder to cry on. He frowned, disturbed by the intensity of his desire, noting that it was stronger than any he

had ever experienced before for any other friend. As had happened frequently since meeting Anna, he was confused and alarmed at the way his systems could be so overtaken by his need to attend to her needs. He did not understand it, and Data disliked not understanding things.

But his ethical programming nudged him to continue to walk away as per her stated request, so he did so, fully distracted by the entire experience as he went to main engineering to ascertain the repair situation.



Stardate 47248.0 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 12:15) — Bridge

Picard noted a senior staff message indicator on the console embedded in his chair's arm. He tapped it to read a note from Crusher to both him and Troi that said, "*Data brought Anna to me with an arm injury. Treatment is complete and successful. I am available to confer about this patient after shift end. 1800, Captain's quarters?*"

Picard glanced up at Troi just as he was doing likewise to him. They exchanged a subtle nod, so he replied to Crusher and Troi with, "*Noted. Thank you. We will see you at 1800.*"

Troi nodded at him again, but this time Riker noticed and asked, "Something up?"

Picard wasn't sure how to answer, but Troi smoothly replied, "Doctor Crusher just sent the Captain and I a report about Anna White's injury earlier. She's fine. All's well."

Riker's brow furrowed as he checked his own message list on his chair's arm. "Hm. I didn't get that report."

"She probably assumed you don't need it," Troi replied.

"Why would you two need it?" Riker asked.

Troi explained, “Even though White is afraid of therapists — for valid reasons — and I’m not in direct contact with her, technically I’m still part of her care team.”

Riker turned to Picard. “And you? You don’t get medical reports for everyone on board.”

Picard scrambled to think up a good reason as he said, “Oh, no, well I...uh...”

Troi filled in for him once more. “White’s quite the darling of Starfleet and Daystrom at the moment. If she were to be catastrophically injured on board the Enterprise, it might get...political,” she said with the last word in a dire tone.

Picard took that baton and ran with it. “Indeed, Counselor. I would not relish the explanations both I and Mr. La Forge would have to make before various inquests should an inspection failure result in the death of such a renowned warp specialist. I’m sure Doctor Crusher was simply setting my mind at ease.”

Riker shrugged and leaned back in his own chair once more. “Yeah, probably. White does seem a bit accident-prone, doesn’t she? Or a trouble magnet?”

Troi put on the firmly pleasant tone she always used to manage Riker, one that Picard remained surprised Riker had not apparently noticed even to this day. She said, “Many bad things have happened to her, yes. But none of them are her fault, least of all today’s fire, from what Geordi said.”

“I guess not,” Riker said, returning his eyes to his own message list.

Picard and Troi exchanged one more brief, knowing glance, each knowing they were both eager to hear more about Crusher’s encounter later.



Picard had just finished pouring Deanna some tea from his white service when his door chimed. He said, "Come!" as both he and Deanna stood to attention.

Beverly indicated for them to sit back down as she entered, waved off his offer of tea, and then flopped back into one of the larger, softer chairs. "It's fine. She's fine. I think. Physically, anyway. It was..." She let out a long, slow sigh. "It was quite the event. And I've spent a lot of the time since considering what I can tell you and what I can't."

Deanna nodded. "You have a confidentiality issue."

"I do. You and I agreed some time ago to be her in-the-background care team, but if I'm in the foreground —"

"That changes the dynamic," Deanna said.

"Exactly," Beverly replied. She turned to Picard. "And even if you are her father, she's an adult. I'd need her permission to tell private medical details to you."

Picard pressed his lips together and nodded resolutely.

"That said," Beverly said as she sat up to lean forward more conversationally, "you're the captain, and she's a high-profile scientific consultant on your ship."

"As much as I want to know everything, I accept your professional judgement," Picard said. "The fact that she's all right is the essential information I hoped for. And Geordi already explained the technical issue."

"Hm, yes, I saw the report. I might still check in with Anna tonight, if she lets me. I have to find the right balance between medical and personal support. I don't want to scare her off, but I want her to really know deep in her heart that I'm there for her."

"That's likely to take some time," Deanna cautioned.

"Yes...but then again..." Beverly smiled wistfully. "You should see how Data was there for her! When she couldn't speak, he was able to interpret the smallest glance for her."

Picard's brow furrowed in concern. "She couldn't speak? I thought it was just an arm injury."

Deanna replied, "Trauma-induced mutism, most likely, given that it's in her records from when the Fleming rescued her."

"Definitely," Beverly confirmed. "Poor thing was scared out of her wits. But also...angry. Defensive."

"Angry at you?" Troi asked.

"No, not specifically. More like...the universe as a whole. Do you remember Myknari Four?"

Deanna thought for a moment, and then answered, "The refugee camp."

"Oh yes, you two and an entire host of Starfleet Medical personnel were called to that. I remember," Picard replied.

Beverly said to him, "Be glad you didn't come along to see. It was horrible. There were children rescued from that mine who had never encountered a kind adult in their entire lives."

"I saw the reports. Ghastly," Picard said with a shudder.

Beverly turned back to Deanna. "Remember how the very little ones could be comforted fairly quickly with an offered treat and a hug? And the older ones, we could reason with them to an extent. They were wary, but some of them were old enough to remember a time before the war that resulted in the mass abductions. They'd taken on leadership roles with the younger ones, so they had an idea of what it meant to offer kindness to someone more helpless than yourself."

Deanna nodded. "It was the ones aged about five to ten that were hardest to reach."

"Exactly. Too old to trust what seemed too good to be true, but too young to rationalise that they were being rescued by people who truly meant them no harm. Deanna, their eyes? Do you remember that haunted, angry, frightened-yet-ready-to-fight look in their eyes?"

"I don't think any of us will ever forget that," Deanna replied, setting her cup down on the table in front of her.

"That's how Anna looked at me at first. I'm entirely certain she would not have come to me at all without Data's support. She

clung to his hand hard the whole time. She trusted him, not me.” Beverly let out a ragged breath.

“Are you all right?” Deanna asked gently.

“I am now, but in that moment, it was heartbreaking. I kept it together because that’s my job and because I’ve had those previous experiences with traumatised children.”

“But she’s not a child,” Picard said.

“Oh yes she is! Part of her, anyway,” Beverly said emphatically. “There is an anguished, terrified, little girl trapped inside that adult body.”

“It is likely that even if everything goes well in socialising her here, she will have periods of regression into childlike tendencies,” Deanna said. “That’s completely normal for anyone with unresolved childhood trauma, especially someone who has had little to no support until now. Once we all do get to meet her, we’ll all have to be very patient about that,” she said pointedly towards Picard.

Before he could respond, Beverly said, “By the end of the treatment, she’d softened to me a little, and I’m hopeful that we can now progress in a more personal relationship.”

Deanna smiled. “It doesn’t take Betazoid powers to see you’re already feeling maternal towards her.”

Beverly put her hands over her heart. “I want to wrap her in blankets and feed her pretty little sugar cookies. I’m not even going to try to hide that.”

“From the files you gave me, it doesn’t sound like Meredith gave her much of that sort of attention,” Picard said to Deanna.

“No, probably not,” Deanna agreed. “The phrase ‘needs TLC’ comes up fairly often with those who have reviewed her case or met her at all.”

“Abundant TLC,” Beverly said. “And as wonderful as Data is with her, it can’t all be from him.”

“She has other friends on board already,” Deanna said.

“Yes, you told me Aisling Navarro’s already adopted her into their little group, and she’s quite adept at tender, loving care. But I

want a turn too,” Beverly said with a hopeful little laugh. “I can’t help it. She looks at you and you just want to...” She shook her head in wonder. “Something about her gets you right into your heart and soul.” She turned to Picard again. “Jean-Luc, be prepared. If she’s yours, she’s going to wrap herself right around your heart.”

Picard chuckled nervously with a half-smile.

Beverly slumped back into the chair once more. “Oh, I hope she is. I want this all to work out. She needs it. She needs a family. Anyway, without going into too many specific details, I can tell you her injuries are all patched up, so other than dealing with all of this trauma stuff —”

A small trilling sound came from the PADD in Beverly’s lab coat pocket. She sat up quickly to pull it out. “Oh! That’s the sound I set just for Anna!”

Deanna’s jaw dropped in surprise. “She’s contacting you already?!”

Picard asked worriedly, “Is she all right?”

“Hang on, let’s see,” Beverly said as she opened the message. She nodded slowly as she read, and then said, “Ah. Okay, she’s sent me and Data a joint message thanking us both for being so kind to her today but that she’s tired and wants to rest undisturbed. Then she says maybe she’ll be up to conversations in the morning.”

“Oh, that’s excellent!” Deanna said excitedly.

But Beverly sighed. “Is it? I really was hoping to see her tonight if I could.”

“Beverly, in less than a day she’s gone from viewing you and all doctors as terrifying to sending you a pleasant message like that. And she’s left the door open to talk more tomorrow.”

Picard pointed out, “She said, ‘Maybe.’”

“A ‘maybe’ from someone this steeped in trauma is most likely a qualified, hesitant ‘yes’,” Deanna said. “Further, she sent this to both you and Data. If she already includes you with one of her most trusted friends, you’re already past a lot of her barriers.”

Beverly nodded. "You're probably right. I'll take this as a good sign. Also, if she can send a message it's reasonable to assume the injury is healing without any problems."

"It's a good sign," Deanna insisted. "No, a wonderful sign. A real breakthrough." She smiled at Picard warmly. "I told you. I firmly believe it's only a matter of time before you get to meet her as well. These steps may come much more slowly than you'd prefer, Captain, but they're coming. I'm sure of it."



Stardate 47248.6 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 18:05) — Ten Forward

Aisling wandered tiredly into Ten Forward and found Geordi sitting at the bar, a glass of something dark in his hand.

"Hey boss. Company?" she asked.

"Sure," he said. "You skipping family dinner?"

She waved her hand in the air. "We weren't sure what time I'd get done with the cargo security management stuff so Kajus and Aoife were planning to eat Dascquen ten root soup."

"And you don't like it?"

"Oh I like it, but I could impulse drive the whole ship with my ass the next day for what it does to my system."

Geordi laughed. "Okay so what, he's got enough Dascquen DNA to avoid it? But what about Aoife?"

"Oh, no, neither of them avoid it. The absolutely noxious farts start immediately after consumption for those two. I at least have Irish guts of steel about it. I think there's a Federation convention protecting people from being subjected to being in a room with those two when they eat that stuff."

Geordi laughed again.

Aisling grinned. "We're a very classy family."

"Yeah, right," he said, taking a sip of his drink.

Ben approached from behind the bar, his usual big smile already beaming at them. “Good evening, Aisling! What can I get you?”

“I’m starving. Something heavy and filling. With tons of cheese. And a beer. A good one.”

“Deep dish lasagna with a Zuolaran stout?” Ben suggested.

“Ohhh, you are very good at this.”

Ben grinned. “Coming right up. You good, Geordi?”

“I’m good, thanks, Ben.”

“You had a hefty day, eh?” Aisling asked.

“Yeah. You heard?”

“About the fire? Yeah. And nasty, crusty bug goo? Sounds lovely. Let’s never speak of it again.”

“Not just that, but Anna’s arm?” Geordi asked.

“What about Anna’s arm?” Aisling asked, but then gasped, “Oh shit, wait, did the fire happen where she and Data were working?”

Ben deftly slipped the plate of steaming lasagna and a tall glass before Aisling and then scurried away.

“Yeah. As the panel burst off, a plasma flame hit Anna in the arm.”

Aisling’s jaw dropped and she started to stand up.

“No no, sit down, she’s fine. Eat your food.”

Aisling sat back down, hefted the large glass, and took an impressive swig.

Geordi chuckled. “I mean it, she’s fine. According to Data, anyway, who took her to sickbay and got her all patched up, then took her back to her quarters.”

Aisling closed her eyes, shook her head, then opened her eyes again in utter astonishment.

“You really didn’t hear? It’s not like you to not be up on all the gossip of the ship.”

“I’ve been in cargo bays doing my actual job all day!” she protested. “Jesus fucking Christ on a cracker, why does the universe keep shitting on Anna? I thought I was setting her up for a great day with Data!”

“You did. Fate intervened,” Geordi said, sipping from his glass again.

“Fucking fate,” Aisling said, stabbing at her food and angrily taking a bite. With a half-full mouth she asked, “But...sickbay? Anna?”

“Data said Crusher took them to another room so she didn’t go into the actual ICU. And then Crusher worked her doctor-mom magic and apparently Anna’s a bit freaked out but generally okay. Sort of.”

“Maybe I should go see her,” Aisling mused.

“Data said she seemed to want to be alone when he left.”

“Oh god, she’s probably all withdrawn again. Shit.”

“That’s not even the only fun part of my day,” Geordi mumbled.

“What else? Dare I ask?” Her eyes went wide again. She whispered, “Did you talk to Andrea?”

“I did.”

“Ohhh,” Aisling groaned. “Do I have two young ladies to worry about tonight?”

“No, I don’t think so. She actually seemed okay.”

“Then why do you sound so blah about it?”

“Because...I feel like an asshole,” Geordi grumbled.

Aisling carefully asked, “Were you an asshole?”

“I tried not to be.”

Aisling relaxed and ate some more of her food. “Then you probably weren’t one. One of the defining qualities of an asshole is not giving a shit about being one, or who gets hurt by it.”

“I guess. I just hope she’s okay.”

“Did she seem okay?”

“Yeah. More than I expected.”

Aisling shot him a vaguely annoyed look. “Don’t tell me it bruises your ego that she’s not upset.”

He sat up quickly, waving a hand in defence. “No, no, nothing like that, I promise. Just...the whole thing was no fun, even if it was necessary, and then the extra drama on top of Anna’s arm and

the mess in the core...it's just been a hard day with a lot of people stuff on top of engineering stuff."

Aisling nodded. "Okay. Fair enough. Anyway, Andrea will be fine. We've all been through it, and we'll all surround her with support. And Anna too, as much as she lets us."

"Yeah."

"I think maybe you and Data and I should chat tomorrow about strategies for that."

"Don't push him on any of it. We agreed."

"No, I don't mean their budding romance. I mean the universe shitting on her. Let's shelve that until tomorrow when we can bring him in, and for now I'll eat this incredibly tasty food and regale you with the fun tales of shipping security from the day."

"Great," Geordi muttered into his glass as he lifted it once more.



Stardate 47248.7 (Wednesday 01/04/2370 18:15) — Deck Eight

As soon as the door to Picard's quarters closed behind them, Deanna put her hand on Beverly's shoulder and said, "Wait, I need a second with you."

"Sure. What's up?" Beverly responded as they moved down the corridor so they were between doors and not near any adjoining corridors.

"I didn't want to say this in front of him, but Beverly, I can tell: you already love this girl."

Beverly laughed a little, and then gave Deanna a conceding nod. "I do. I keep trying to tell myself that that's silly but...oh Deanna I do. I wasn't kidding when I said she worms right into your heart. I know it's too soon, I know I can't rush things, and don't worry I will stay calm and professional and give her all the space she needs, but..."

“You want to mother her well beyond blankets and cookies.”

“I really do. It’s...it’s intense,” Beverly said, pointing to her chest with both hands. “A little frightening, to be honest. You read about adoptive parents seeing an older child amongst a group and just knowing, ‘That one. That one needs to be our child,’ and somehow the child knows it too, but it sounds like a fairy tale. But...yeah, this one. I just...I can’t help it.”

Deanna nodded. “I think you and I should probably do some sessions for you about it to help you work out why you feel this way.”

Beverly gave Deanna a moment of faux-suspicious side-eye, and then crossed her arms. “I know where you’re going with that, and I’m not going to deny it. She’s...his. And that matters. Whether it should or not. I think that’s part of how her eyes got to me. They’re his colour. She doesn’t look like him, but she has his eyes.”

Deanna quietly said, “He says she looks like his mother.”

“He told me that too. Oh, Deanna, what do we do if she isn’t his?” she asked desperately.

“Would that affect how you feel?”

Beverly considered that for a moment, and then shook her head definitively. “No. No more than if someone had told me by some mixup that Jack wasn’t Wesley’s father.” She held up a finger and added firmly, “Not that that was a possibility.”

Deanna smiled. “No, but I understand your point. And I can tell she’s got nearly as strong a hold on you already as Wesley does.”

“That’s...that’s strange, though, right? Possibly even inappropriate?”

Deanna shrugged. “I wouldn’t say the feelings are inappropriate, only what you do about them. You’re a naturally very maternal person, and developing feelings like that for someone who isn’t your biological child isn’t abnormal at all. You’re also very careful. It’s not like you’re going to call Wes tonight and tell him he has a sister.”

With a shocked little scoff of a laugh, Beverly said, “No, not by a long shot.” Then she rolled her eyes a little and added, “Although when he was little he wished for a baby sister constantly. But no, of course not. I’d never make a sudden leap like that.”

“Then I think you’re fine for now. It’s even okay to daydream a little about that possibility in the future. There’s never anything wrong with wishing for positive relationships. I think Anna would be very, very lucky indeed to have someone like you offering her maternal support. When she’s ready to receive it,” Deanna said, the last words spoken as a firm warning.

“Absolutely,” Beverly agreed. “When she’s ready. I’m here for her whenever she’s ready.”

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Stardate 47250.2 (Thursday 02/04/2370 07:45) — Main Engineering

Geordi looked up from the central console when Data walked into main engineering. “Hey Data,” he said. “You okay?”

“I am fine,” Data said politely. “How are you?”

In the corner by the entrance to the drive bay, Aisling put down the security PADD she’d been reading and watched Data closely.

“I’m good, Data, but I haven’t had a chance to catch up with you about yesterday,” Geordi replied. “You sure you’re okay?”

Data blinked, his brow up quizzically. “I am not experiencing any malfunctions that I am aware of. Are you referring to the fire? By the time I attempted to attend to that matter, it had been taken care of.”

“Yeah, that part’s fine. I mean...you. Are you okay?”

“I was undamaged. Only Anna was harmed, and I ensured she was cared for.”

Aisling stood and joined them. “We heard, Data. It was really good of you to be there for her.”

Data’s head tilted to the side. “It was both my professional and personal duty to assist a colleague and a friend.”

“Have you seen her this morning?” Aisling asked.

Data shook his head. “No. She has not yet requested company.”

“How was she when you left her yesterday?” Geordi asked.

Data’s brow furrowed in what looked like concern. Geordi and Aisling exchanged a knowing glance.

Then Data tilted his head again and replied, “I am uncertain how much personal information I should relay at this time, in this populated space.”

“You know what, you’re right about that,” Aisling said. She came up alongside him and gently took his arm, then said back over her shoulder to Geordi, “Let’s go to a meeting room.”

“Is that necessary?” Data asked, though he did not resist as she walked him towards the exit.

“It definitely is,” she replied.

The three of them went into one of the small meeting rooms opposite main engineering and sat around the table there.

“Okay Data, tell us: how upset is Anna? Going to sickbay must have been hell for her,” Aisling said.

“I do not wish to reveal her personal information even in this more limited space,” Data said.

Geordi assured him, “We’re not trying to dig for gossip, Data. We’re just worried about her, that’s all. And you. It can’t have been easy watching someone you care about suffer like that.”

Data looked back and forth between them, his brow rising and falling several times as he calculated his best options of disclosure.

“You’re worried about her,” Aisling said.

“I am incapable —”

“No you’re not,” Aisling said, cutting Data off. “You’re perfectly capable of worrying. Call it whatever you like but you’re worrying. I can see it on your face.”

Geordi said, “We all just want to do what’s best for everyone. Sickbay isn’t fun for anyone, let alone Anna.”

Data replied, “‘Fun’ is most certainly not an applicable adjective. Doctor Crusher was very kind to Anna. Anna’s arm was fully repaired. It is Doctor Crusher’s intent to visit Anna again today. Anna sent both of us a message last night saying she may be up to conversation today, but she has not yet said anything further. When I last saw her she said she was both tired and embarrassed. It is important to me not to say anything that might exacerbate that embarrassment, even though I do not believe she has anything to be embarrassed for. Yet...I remain concerned for the severe level of terror Anna displayed as I encouraged her to go to sickbay.”

“Well we know why she’s afraid of it. It looks the same as the one where Loxos hurt her,” Aisling said. “Same module.”

“Yes,” Data replied. “I am aware of the concept of a triggering memory. That is why I called Doctor Crusher to come out, and why the doctor treated Anna in a different location.” His brow furrowed again. “My concern is for what she said immediately before I called Doctor Crusher. I do not understand it, and I am concerned about what it might mean.”

Geordi asked, “What did she say?”

Data appeared highly conflicted.

Geordi gently added, “I swear, Data, we only want to help both of you. You don’t have to tell us anything, but the more you can share, the more we can help.”

Data nodded, and then replied, “I was holding her hand, attempting to gently guide her towards sickbay, when she panicked and began to attempt to pull me back. She then said, ‘Please, I’ll be good. I’ll be good. Don’t hurt me.’ I would never intentionally hurt her, and I am confused about what ‘being good’ has to do with any of it.”

“Shit,” Aisling said with a horrified expression. “Data, how did she sound when she said it?”

Data replied, “Upset. Frightened. Pleading. Desperate.”

“Damn,” Geordi said softly.

Data then repeated the words in Anna’s voice, exactly as she said it, like a recorded playback. The disembodied terror of Anna begging, “Please, I’ll be good. I’ll be good. Don’t hurt me,” made the other two shudder. When Data continued by replaying Anna’s next whispers of, “I’ll be good, I’ll be good,” Aisling stood in horror and put her hands over her face.

“I am sorry,” Data said in his own voice. “I did not mean to upset you.”

Geordi hung his head low. “Oof, Data, she was really freaked out. No wonder you’re concerned.”

“No, no,” Aisling said, beginning to pace back and forth on one side of the room. “This is bigger than you two think. This is more than just Loxos and sickbay.”

“What? How so?” Geordi asked, looking up at her.

Aisling asked, “You haven’t done the Civilian Emergency Situation Intervention courses, have you?”

“No, not the full classes,” Geordi said. “Just the stuff included in the regular curriculum like everyone else.” He turned to Data. “Have you?”

“No, I have not,” Data replied.

Aisling took a deep breath, whispered, “Shit, shit, shit, fuck,” and then turned to them both to explain, “There’s training in those courses about things we in security are supposed to listen for. Phrases that indicate possible subterfuge, possible unaddressed side issues, stuff like that. Part of it is listening for things kids say that indicate abuse within a household or school, and that’s one of those phrases. A little kid crying that they promise to behave coupled with begging not to be hurt? That’s a classic indicator of abuse. Little abused kids say that as bargaining to make the terror and pain stop because they think it’s what an abuser wants to hear.”

Geordi’s jaw dropped, but Data asked, “Anna thought I would abuse her?”

“No, Data, not you,” Aisling said. “Definitely not you. I am quite sure that Anna sees you as her primary source of safety, actually. Foundationally. You’re her rock. And that’s why it’s really horrifying that she said that to you, because that was something from her childhood coming out. Crying and begging like that in a moment of panic? That’s visceral, deep-level trauma stuff.”

“She probably begged Loxos to stop,” Geordi said.

“Maybe, but from what we know about what he did to her, she was unconscious when he took her to his sickbay,” Aisling said. “I mean maybe she begged him in there but the scene as Data describes it sounds like she was recalling having been pulled somewhere and promising to be good to not have to go wherever

that was. I'm telling you, it doesn't sound like an adult victim. It sounds like a child."

Data said, "There was a particularly child-like tone to her pleading. That is part of my concern and confusion."

Aisling nodded. "Based on things she's let slip here and there, I think she's got all kinds of demons in her past from even before Loxos got to her. Being in pain, whatever shock there was from the explosion in the first place, and then being led to a place she associates with terror...I think it was more than she could take, and something in her resorted to the frightened, traumatised kid inside of her."

Geordi and Data exchanged a look of astonishment.

"Damn it!" Aisling said, stomping a foot in frustration. "It should be Counselor Troi helping Anna with this shit but Anna's afraid of her too because she's afraid of therapists because of those assholes at The Institute."

"It's more than that," Geordi said. "Anna's afraid Troi will read her mind no matter how many times I tell her that she can't do that. I think you're right that there are dark demons hiding in her head and she does not want them coming out for inspection."

Aisling nodded. "Anna's emotional state is an open book but she's definitely got her secrets, and she does not want to talk about them, not even with us, her friends."

Data said, "Is she not entitled to that privacy?"

Aisling replied, "Of course she is. That's why we don't press her on it. But it's not good for any of us to carry all of our baggage ourselves. Trust me, I've learned this being married to a child-traumatised person: kids who've been through hell turn into adults who need help processing that hell. Not by force or manipulation, but by support and love and all that good stuff."

Geordi said, "Well yeah, that's why we can't force the therapist stuff."

"Exactly," Aisling said. "That's why we — her friends — need to do what we can with what she gives us." She crossed her arms and frowned deeply. "The more that dribbles out here and there,

plus the way she's afraid of the captain, I'm really starting to suspect someone on the Baltimore hurt her before the crash."

"What, with her mom right there?" Geordi asked incredulously.

Aisling shrugged and cringed at the same time.

"You think maybe her mom hurt her?!" Geordi asked, then groaned and popped his VISOR off onto the table so he could rub his temples and forehead. "Holy shit."

Aisling replied, "Well...what kind of mother turns their kid into a sneaky stowaway in the first place? Kids weren't allowed on duty ships back then. Anna's mentioned never having played with other kids even when she was on Earth, before the Baltimore. That's why she's so happy to play with Aoife, because she missed little-kid play entirely. What if her mom was keeping her hidden for abusive reasons? Or just general neglectful parenting? What if Anna fears our captain because the captain of the Baltimore hurt her and her mom just let it happen? Or someone else on board? Or everyone on board?"

Geordi put his VISOR back on. "Aisling that's...I mean it's all terrible but it's also wild speculation. We have no evidence of any of that just because of what she said to Data yesterday."

Aisling nodded slowly, looking at the ground, hands on her hips. "Hm," she grunted, and then strode purposefully around to the other side of the room where there was an LCARS console on the wall. "We need to know more about the Baltimore crew. Computer, show me all available security files on Captain Dager of the Baltimore, access code Navarro-one-dash-forty-seven-ice-cream."

"Ice cream?" Geordi asked.

"Security codes don't have to be strictly alpha-numeric. I change mine a lot so I use words I'll remember. Last time I changed it, I was craving ice cream."

The computer made an error beep and said, "*No record of a Captain Dager for the Baltimore.*"

The three looked at each other in surprise.

The computer continued, *“There is a record of Commander William Dager, lead mission specialist for Project Covaris, a scouting mission for potential trellium mining, terraforming, and colonisation, assigned to SS Baltimore, NAR-22601 on stardate —”*

“Yes, computer, that William Dager. Display all security records,” Aisling said. The computer chirped and began to display the records. Aisling turned briefly to the others and muttered, “How much you want to bet this jerk made them all call him ‘captain’ because he was the team leader?”

Geordi shrugged. “Probably. I’ve known several like that, stretching honorary tradition into grandstanding.” He rose and went to Aisling’s side to read the screen with her, and Data did likewise on her other side. As they all began to skim the list, Geordi whistled through his teeth disapprovingly.

“No kidding,” Aisling replied. “Look at all of these write-ups and warnings.”

Data said, “But these are all minor infractions spaced over multiple assignments.”

“Yeah, Data, but it’s a pattern,” Aisling said.

“Sure is,” Geordi agreed. “This guy was a bully waiting for the chance to be a bigger bully with no oversight. Who the hell gave him that command?”

“Good question,” Aisling replied. “Computer, show us the security files for all of the Baltimore’s crew.”

Data’s brow furrowed. “Is this an ethical investigation?”

Aisling side-eyed him. “They’re all dead. Who’s going to complain? Besides, I’m doing it in the presence of my supervisors.”

“Hey now,” Geordi said with an edge of warning.

Aisling smirked at him. “Don’t worry, all we’re doing is looking at entirely allowable stuff for our rank so that we can make sure we’re properly informed to facilitate support for a member of our team. We’re not digging deep. Yet,” she added quietly.

Data and Geordi exchanged a look of concern behind her back, but then both turned back to the screen nonetheless.

“Looks like quite the motley crew here,” Geordi noted.

“Mmhm,” Aisling said. “That’s a lot of problematic behaviour when you lump it all together. Except maybe this one,” she said, pointing to the record for Ensign Hwang. “She just looks green, not long out of the academy, ops specialty and terraforming training.”

Geordi said, “Poor kid probably got talked into a long-haul flight assignment with hopes of a big career reward later.”

“Maybe, or she was running from something we don’t know about.”

Geordi sighed. “Aisling, you always suspect people first.”

“That’s why I’m a damned good security officer,” she replied.

Geordi said, “She could have been running from a bad situation, as a victim.”

“Could be. That’s why it’s worth considering all theories and weeding them out towards more likely truths,” Aisling said.

Data pointed to the entry for Anna’s mother. “Lieutenant White does not appear to have as many incidents logged as the others either.”

“Yeah but that’s when you have to start playing matchy-matchy,” Aisling said as she ran her fingers down the various lists. “Aha,” she said quietly, and pulled up more details on two records. “See, this one’s the same date and time for White and Dager.”

They all read the brief behavioural report together, and then Aisling interpreted, “That coding to me sounds like an off-campus party that dipped into illegal activities and got civilian cops involved, and then Starfleet took its people from the event for separate admonishment. That shit happens a lot with dumbass newbie cadets, but with higher ranks? They should know better. And...hang on...” She swiped through more files and then added, “Yep, the civilian specialist on the Baltimore mission — Tim Garneth — got a civvie charge from the same party.”

Geordi surmised, “So, what...Anna’s mom gets in with a bad crowd, decides to join them on their long-distance mission, but also figures, ‘Hey here’s a good idea, I’ll bring my preschooler along for the party ride.’ Really?”

Aisling wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, that is pretty weird. Especially with having to sneak her on.”

Data suggested, “Perhaps the assignment was a punishment, though that still does not indicate why a child would be brought along.”

“Her mom must’ve not wanted to leave her behind for so long,” Aisling said. “But if she was neglectful or abusive, you’d think she’d want an excuse to dump the kid. Anna has no official father listed but there had to be some kind of extended family, surely?”

“Maybe not,” Geordi said. “Or maybe something else weird was going on.”

“It’s all very weird,” Aisling said. “Breaking big-time rules when you’re already in trouble in a way that’s got to be bad for everyone involved? This lady must’ve had some deep, hidden reason for dragging Anna out to the ass-end of Federation space on a long-term mission like that.”

“I can’t think of any good reasons,” Geordi said.

“That’s what worries me. If there was no good reason, the mother must’ve had a bad reason. And I think Anna paid the price for that bad reason the whole ride until they crashed.”

An uncomfortable silence came over all three of them for a moment.

Geordi broke it by asking, “Should we maybe tell Counselor Troi about all of this?”

Data said, “She may already be aware of it.”

“Maybe, but we should probably make sure,” Aisling said.

“Leave that to me,” Geordi said. “Anna’s my official responsibility.”

“Yeah but you probably shouldn’t bring it up today,” Aisling said. “Not with Ambassador Troi coming on board sometime today.”

Geordi chuckled. “Right, not today. Definitely not while she’s aboard.”

Data said, “I do not understand. Why would having Ambassador Troi aboard preclude Counselor Troi from wishing to talk about Anna and Meredith White? Would having one’s own mother nearby not serve as inspiration to examine other mother-daughter relationships?”

Geordi and Aisling looked at each other, snort-laughed in unison, and shook their heads.

“Oh Data,” Aisling said. “No, no, no, no, no. Family dynamics aren’t the same as laying out a bunch of matching circuits and upgrading them all at the same time.”

“Yeah, it’d be more like laying out a bunch of live wires and dousing them with a flammable, conductive liquid.”

Data’s brow furrowed again. “That would be dangerous, foolish, and accomplish nothing of value.”

Aisling and Geordi said in unison, “Exactly.”

Data frowned, blinked, and then said, “Ah. You mean to say that while Counselor Troi is experiencing additional stress from handling her own mother’s disruptive presence, she may be less able to deal with the apparent friction between another mother and daughter, especially when that secondary situation is not urgent given that the other mother is deceased.”

Aisling patted his arm. “Precisely, Data. Just because Counselor Troi would be capable of dealing with it at the same time doesn’t mean we should pile it on her. Let’s wait until after the Ambassador leaves.”

“How about taking the ‘let’s’ part out entirely and leave it to me?” Geordi said firmly. “I’ll talk to Troi about it eventually. Otherwise the three of us should agree to stop this here and now before it shifts from support to actual prying.”

Aisling nodded. “Got it. I promise.” She made a crossing motion over her heart.

Geordi smirked. “Yeah, your heart is in the right place, but we all need to promise not to antagonise Anna by bringing any of this up with her.”

“Definitely not,” Aisling agreed.

Data asked, “Then how do we support her with this knowledge?”

“By keeping on doing exactly what we’ve been doing already,” Aisling said. “We stay open to listening to her whenever she’s ready to talk about any of it. We do what you just did in terms of finding alternate ways of getting her whatever assistance she needs without making her go through hell for it. We be there for her. We show understanding but don’t drag any information out of her.” She sighed and added, “And for my part, I let her have as many playdates as she wants with Aoife because frankly I think they both need it.”



Stardate 47250.3 (Thursday 02/04/2370 08:18) — Deck Thirty-One — Room 5435, Anna’s Lab

“Come in,” came Anna’s voice from within her lab. The door opened to reveal her sitting at a table, stacking small components into tiny towers.

Doctor Crusher stepped just inside the door, not even far enough to let it close. She said, “Hi sweetheart, I hope it’s okay if —” She cut herself short at seeing Anna’s jaw drop and eyes go wide. Crusher gasped and hurriedly said, “Oh, I’m sorry if that offends you, calling you sweetheart. It’s...reflexive.”

Still looking entirely shocked, Anna shook her head slowly.

Crusher tentatively asked, “It...doesn’t offend you?”

Anna bit her bottom lip, her expression shifting wildly between emotions that Crusher couldn’t fully track.

The doctor decided to take a risk and ask, “Have you been waiting your whole life for someone to call you sweetheart in a kindly way?”

Anna nodded wholeheartedly.

Crusher smiled at her warmly. “Okay, well then that’ll work out nicely because like I said, it was an automatic reflex. I say it to lots of people, probably more often than I should. So if it’s okay to say it to you, I’m going to keep doing it.”

Anna grinned widely, then looked embarrassed, flapped her hands briefly, and turned away.

Crusher asked, “Is it okay if I talk with you some more?”

Anna took a deep breath, regained her composure, nodded, and then glanced indicatively towards the chair closest to the door.

“Thank you,” Crusher said as she sat down. “How are you feeling? It’s okay if you can’t talk. You can gesture or type on a PADD. And it’s okay if you don’t know all of the right words. I promise to ask for clarification before making assumptions.”

“I can talk today, sort of,” Anna replied softly, still sounding a little overwhelmed. “I’m...I’m really sorry about how I acted yesterday.”

“I already told you there’s nothing to be sorry for.”

Anna shrugged awkwardly.

“But you’re still embarrassed.”

Anna nodded. “Data said I shouldn’t be.”

“Well, that’s a little easy for him to say, isn’t it?” Crusher said with a knowing look, still smiling.

“I guess. My arm’s okay though. It doesn’t hurt or anything.”

“Is it okay if I give it another scan?”

Anna looked at Crusher with slightly narrowed eyes for a moment, but then nodded again and slowly moved her left arm up towards the table. However, since it was covered in her little stacks, she frowned at them and used her right arm to shove them all aside, tumbling over as they went.

“Oh,” Crusher said with a sudden look of concern. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“No, I just like stacking stuff. You said I was supposed to rest. That’s how I rest. And think.”

“Oh, I see,” Crusher said, less worried. “My son went through a phase of trying to stack all of our cutlery. He learned a lot about physics and balance, and I learned how to put up with a lot of clattering noise.”

Anna appeared baffled. “You didn’t yell at him for the noise?”

Crusher was taken aback for a moment, but then carefully responded, “No, of course not. Children make noise.”

Anna, baffled further still, asked, “You didn’t...punish him?”

Calmly but firmly Crusher said, “Absolutely not. Nobody should ever punish a child for being a child.”

Anna looked away in confusion for a moment, then shook her head, shrugged again, and gradually pushed her left arm across the table towards the doctor while simultaneously scrutinising her closely.

Crusher pulled out her tricorder and swept the medical sensor over Anna’s arm. “I’m glad it doesn’t hurt. Any problems with movement or stiffness?”

“No, you did it up really good,” Anna said.

Crusher smiled again. “Well that’s nice to hear. I don’t see anything on this scan so you’re probably fine.” As soon as she leaned back and started to put her tricorder back in her pocket, Anna withdrew the arm and tucked it tight to her side, not taking her eyes off of Crusher for a moment. Crusher gently said, “I know that look. I’ve seen it before. You’re trying to figure me out, if I have ulterior motives for coming to see you.”

“Do you?” Anna asked flatly.

“My motives are that I care about my patients and it’s my job to make sure people who don’t like sickbay still get the care they need. I honestly never can tell where the boundary lies for me between professionally caring for people versus personally, because usually it’s both. I probably invest too much of myself with too many patients, but that’s just who I am. My motives are all mixed up in that.”

Anna continued watching her suspiciously. Whatever delight at having been called “sweetheart” had evaporated, and the young lady’s shields were clearly back up.

Crusher continued, “But I’m not trying to trick you or manipulate you in any way. I want to help you and make sure you’re happy, healthy, and safe.”

“Hm,” Anna said. It struck Crusher as sounding like Picard did when he was diplomatically unconvinced.

“I think you find that hard to believe and I understand that. It’s okay. You don’t have to believe me yet. You can take time to make me prove it to you.”

Anna began to twist her fingers in her lap and looked away. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve been learning stuff. There are more nice people around than I thought. It’s just...I can’t always figure out why people are being nice to me. Sometimes it’s obvious that they’re doing it because I’m useful. Some people seem to be just...always nice.” Her brow furrowed as if this was a strange concept. “Geordi is nice because he wants me to do engineering stuff. I don’t mean that he’d be awful to me if I wasn’t useful, because he seems pretty friendly, but I think mostly he’s nice to me because he wants to keep me here and happy enough to keep doing stuff. Data...Data’s different. I don’t think he expects anything from me. I think he’s just always nice and not just to me, but lately sometimes maybe extra to me.”

Crusher replied, “Data is a genuinely nice person. Kind through and through.”

Anna looked up at her suddenly and blurted, “He makes me feel safer than anyone ever in the whole universe.”

Touched by the intensity of Anna’s appreciation of Data, Crusher replied, “Mmhm. I can tell.”

Anna’s speech sped up, the words tumbling out of her so fast that Crusher could hardly keep up. “Aisling is nice to me because I think I’m a project for her and Andrea is nice because she thinks I’m more impressive than I really am and most of engineering is like that actually and also because I’m useful or at least they think

I am even though I don't know if I am anymore after the drive's been done and now there's even more damage from the whole interphasic problem so I don't know if they're all going to stay nice or get angry with me at any minute and I can't tell with you because I'm not useful to you, I'm the opposite of useful to you, but you're nice and say wonderful things to me and I can't figure out why unless it's because you're like Data which I'm starting to think maybe you are but I'm not sure yet." She looked away again and flapped her hands briefly in front of herself before clasping them tightly and twisting her fingers even harder than before.

Crusher took a deep breath to process all of Anna's words and then carefully reached forward towards Anna's tangled hands. She put her hands over Anna's as she said, "That is one of the greatest compliments anyone has ever given me."

Anna looked at her again and blinked in confusion.

Crusher clarified, "That I'm nice like Data is."

"Oh," Anna whispered.

"Just relax. It's okay," Crusher said as she rubbed the backs of Anna's hands until the grip loosened. "There you go. This is hard stuff for you. I get it. You can keep fiddling with your fingers if it helps you, but do it gently. Don't hurt yourself, okay?"

Crusher sat back and put her own hands in her lap neatly, one over the other, completely relaxed.

Anna blinked several times again, then looked down at her own hands, back to Crusher's, and then mimicked the doctor's hand positioning. She then returned her gaze to Crusher's face and stared at her quietly for a moment. Then she said, "I think maybe your son is really lucky to have a mom like you."

Crusher had to take a deep breath to avoid tearing up. She gulped away the lump forming in her throat and said, "That's also a really wonderful compliment. Thank you. You know, if it'd help you, I'd be happy to —"

"No!" Anna shouted, raising her hands up defensively. "Don't say it!"

Crusher clamped her mouth shut, worried she'd pushed too far, too fast.

Anna withdrew her arms back, clasping her hands under her chin. "Don't say you'll be my mother now. Don't be another one of those women who does that."

"I'm sorry," Crusher said. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"It doesn't...I'm not..." Anna clapped her hands hard over her face and shook her head. Through them she said, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It's just that ever since I escaped The Institute I keep meeting women who know my story and say, 'I'll be your mother now'." Her hands dropped roughly to her lap again, revealing an expression of anguish. "And that made me so happy."

Anna sniffled and continued, "But then I noticed a pattern. Not at first because it's so hard for me to understand people, but I'm good at seeing patterns when the same thing happens over and over. And I realised, those women...they didn't want to be my mother. They wanted me to be their dolly. They wanted someone they could dote on a little bit and play mommy to in ways that suited their needs, but not mine.

"It would always start out so nice at first because they'd give me things and attention and make me feel wanted, until I asked for something that I needed. Then they'd get...cold. Awkward. And then disappear. So now...I don't want to let that start just to end like that again. I can't take it. I can't take how I kept believing it because I wanted it so much, but then how stupid I felt every time when it became clear that none of them wanted a messed-up pile of trash like me." Suddenly her anguish turned into a fierce glare. She snarled, "And I hate feeling stupid. It makes me angry."

"Of course you hate it," Crusher replied. "Everyone hates feeling stupid, but for someone as clever as you are, it hits you in your core identity, the thing you know that's absolutely true about yourself: that you are very, very intelligent. So to be made to feel the fool is a deep cut."

Once again, Anna looked baffled, the fire eradicated from her eyes.

Crusher repeated, “I’m sorry for almost saying something that has been said to you casually before. I didn’t mean to sound like that, but you have no way of knowing how sincere I am. Like I said before, you need time to learn to trust me. I leapt too far ahead, so I apologise for that.

“The thing is, Anna, I’m fairly certain that the women who said that to you probably meant it in the moment. I’d like to think they were trying to be kind, but they didn’t understand how deeply you need that kind of maternal care and affection. It is definitely in my nature to be like that in general, so I understand their intention. But you’re right that it’s not a relationship that can be casually offered and then forgotten. They probably didn’t intend to hurt you, but they did hurt you, and I can see how much that pain lingers. I’m so sorry you’ve been through that on top of everything else.”

Anna’s lower lip trembled and tears began to spill out from her eyes. She roughly wiped them away, prompting Crusher to stand up and bring over a box of tissues from the nearby counter. Anna took one and pressed it against her face, hiding behind it.

“It’s okay, Anna. Everything’s fine. It’s okay for you to cry about this. This hurts. It hurts my heart to know that any child anywhere has ever gone without maternal love. It’s a horrible reality. But I want you to understand something.”

Anna lowered the tissue just enough to peek over it at Crusher once more.

Crusher continued, “It’s not your job to get someone to give you that kind of love and support. You should have always had it, so it makes sense that you’d seek it out and gratefully grab for it when offered, but it’s something that has to be given over a long time. That feeling of warmth and safety you crave can’t ever come from mere words spoken in a moment of kind intentions. Not even from me calling you ‘sweetheart’. It has to build over years and years, during which you see repeatedly that you can count on someone in good times and hard times. Parenthood isn’t just praising your child when you’re proud or bandaging a scraped knee: it’s the pattern of always being there for them, even when

they drive you crazy or mess up or things simply don't go as planned.

"What those women meant was they'd happily do the easy praise stuff, and they let you down when it came to the harder, long-term stuff. And that's why I won't say the same thing they did, now that I know what those words have done to you. I'm not going to make you any surface-level promises like that.

"I'm not your mother, but if you'll let me, I'd like very much to show you what long term, sustained, reliable support looks like. I'd like to be there for you in the good times and the bad times. I'll bandage your knee but I'll also nag you to remember to maintain that artificial leg of yours properly before you end up with infected sores from it. Because I care, Anna. I truly do. And it's okay for you to wait for me to prove that to you over a long period of time before you trust me fully. Whatever you need, it's okay. Everything is going to be okay."



Stardate 47250.3 (Thursday 02/04/2370 08:32) — Deanna Troi's Quarters

*"I'll be docking on the station within the hour, Little One," Lwaxana said to Deanna over the latter's terminal. "Oh, it's been both a dream and a nightmare working with the Cairn. They're absolutely lovely but it's such a strain, even for my advanced communication skills. Did you get all of my notes for their delegation's needs?"*

"Yes, mother," Deanna said with a forced smile. "I already told you that in a message last night. And the day before that. And when you first sent the files."

*"Yes of course, but there's telling me and then there's actually doing it. Is everything going to be ready for them when they arrive tomorrow? I simply cannot bear any more confusion or delays."*

“Everything will be as you requested, mother. Our whole senior team has seen to it.”

Lwaxana rolled her eyes. *“Not everyone on your senior team has the mental fortitude to see to the intricacies of diplomacy.”*

Deanna gritted her teeth for a moment, but then calmly replied, “Mother, that isn’t exactly a diplomatic thing to say.”

*“Oh please, Deanna, I can hear your defensive thoughts about your friends all the way through subspace. Make me the villain as always if you must but I must ensure everything is done correctly. I haven’t put in all of this effort just to lose it all over a ridiculous misunderstanding.”*

“Nobody’s making you a villain, mother. I understand why you’re concerned, but I am also trying to assure you that it’ll all go fine. You seem unusually wound up about this delegation in particular. Did something go wrong?”

*“No, no, nothing’s gone wrong because I have worked so hard to ensure that it hasn’t!”* Lwaxana said, snapping a little at the end.

Deanna could not hide her surprise at the reaction.

Lwaxana took a deep breath and adjusted her fabulously sparkling dress. *“What I mean to say is that it has been challenging and I’m a bit...tired. I could use some of that Enterprise luxury this evening.”*

“I will book you some time in the spa,” Deanna offered.

*“And will you join me?”* Lwaxana asked hopefully.

“If I have time amidst all of the preparations that I assure you we are tending to...yes.”

Lwaxana smiled. *“That’s my girl. I’ll see you soon.”* With that, she ended the transmission.

Deanna let out a long groan, slumped back in her chair for a moment, and then began to plan for as calming an evening as possible with her mother.



Once Anna had regained some of her composure — amidst more apologies — Crusher said, “If there’s anything else I can do in terms of your medical care to make your life easier, please feel free to tell me. And not just your physical health, but your emotional and mental health too. It’s all connected.”

“I know. A lot of me is a big, hot mess.”

Crusher laughed a little. “You’re not even close to the biggest mess on this ship on any of those counts, trust me. And you’ve only been on board for what, six weeks?” Her smile faded. “But I know you’re wary of mental health practitioners, and I understand why. I’d like to make sure you feel comfortable talking about anything you need to talk about. I don’t have full counselor training, but I have some.”

Anna wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like talking about that stuff.”

“Nobody’s going to make you. You can when you want to, when you need to, all on your own schedule. It’s safe here for you to do that. It’s not like The Institute.”

“I know,” Anna said. “I know what they did was wrong, and not just locking me up like that. I’ve been learning a lot since I got out about how wrong even stuff they told me was. They told me so much of what makes me me is wrong, and now with Data and the others telling me otherwise, I’m learning that some of that stuff isn’t as bad as they said, it’s just different. Like knowing so much weird stuff or thinking in different ways or talking fast or singing how I feel.”

“It’s absurd that anyone would tell you you can’t sing how you feel, especially mental health professionals. Singing is therapeutic.”

“I don’t know about that, it’s just how my brain works. My conversations with the Baltimore were pretty one-sided, so a lot of it was singing the songs that made me feel better. I guess I learned

to think that way too, in those lyrics and those melodies.” Anna looked angry again as she said, “But the doctors and staff at The Institute didn’t like it if I stayed silent and they didn’t like it if I used songs to say how I felt. They banned me from singing to make me ‘learn to communicate properly’ but that made me not want to say anything and then I got in trouble for that again.”

“Anna, please believe me when I tell you that they were very wrong to stop you from communicating in the way you felt most comfortable.”

“I know that now. I think something in me knew it then too. But it was so confusing. Dr. Rundell wanted me to prove his theories and when I didn’t he got angry. And I didn’t want to make him angry but he was making me angry and everyone only cared about his feelings.”

“That must’ve been confusing for you indeed. You finally had people back in your life and no matter what you did to try to please them — even at a cost to yourself — it didn’t work.”

Anna opened her arms wide in front of her to indicate relief at being understood. “Exactly! At first I did want to please them, but everybody seemed against me. It’s not what I expected at all!”

Crusher said, “And after all you’d gone through to get back to Earth. It’s truly awful that you weren’t met with abundant kindness upon your return.”

Anna looked away and chuckled wryly, crossing her arms defensively. “See, the thing is, I know a song for that too. I almost just started singing it, but they really got in my head to make me stop doing that.”

“Anna, I would love to hear whatever song pops into your head, anytime, anywhere, for any reason.”

Anna slid her arms back down and once again started twisting her fingers nervously. “Oh but...it’s a very sad song. And maybe you won’t like it if I sing it badly.”

“Sad songs are a perfect way to express our feelings. I promise to love it even if you’re terribly off key. I sing off-key show tunes to myself in my sonic shower every morning.”

Anna's whole expression lit up. "Show tunes!? That's what I like! This one I'm thinking of is from *Peter Pan*!"

Crusher grinned widely and said, "I absolutely insist you sing it. Please. I want to hear it."

"Really?"

"Really."

Anna nodded, looked away, took a deep breath, and began to softly sing, "*When I went home, I thought that certainly someone would leave the door or window open wide for me.*" She bit her lip for a moment to stave off more tears, and then continued, carrying every note perfectly, "*And surely there would be a welcome light?*"

Crusher pressed her own lips together to avoid tearing up as well.

"*When I went home, I counted so upon somebody waiting up to ask me questions on and on,*" Anna sang in a voice that was nearly childlike in its pleading innocence. "*To ask me where I'd gone, was I all right?*"

But then she stood, steadier than Crusher expected on her one leg, and her tone darkened. In a rich contralto, the anger rising rapidly with every word, Anna sang, "*But the door was barred.*" She suddenly looked at Crusher with the fire back in her eyes as she sang through clenched teeth, "*And the windows barred and I knew with an awful dread...*"

Crusher gulped, certain that Anna was using the song to refer to the bars on the windows at The Institute.

Overcome with anger shifting back into despair, Anna once again turned away and sadly sang, "*...that somebody else, some other boy was sleeping in my bed.*"

Crusher couldn't fully suppress the shudder that overtook her. This was more than a song. This was a glimpse into otherwise unspeakable anguish. She felt dragged into the emotions, nearly overwhelmed by how brutally intimate this sharing had suddenly become.

Anna took in another deep breath — very raggedly this time — and returned to a softer tone, though less tentative than before. What had started as a nervous recital had morphed into a stage-worthy performance, whether Anna intended it to be or not. *“When I went home, I found that — sad to say — you must expect to be forgotten once you’ve gone away.”*

Crusher’s heart broke.

*“And so I couldn’t stay,”* Anna continued, her voice descending back down into nearly a stage whisper. *“That lonely night, when I went home.”* She carried the last note as if it were a tiny, fragile thing, until it evaporated of its own accord.

Anna slumped back down into her chair, head down as if she was depleted, as if the song had ripped a fragment of the pain out of her and left her raw for the ordeal of it.

Unable to hold tears back any longer, Crusher let them tumble out as she whispered, “Oh sweetheart.”

Anna blinked rapidly, as if dragging herself back to the present by force. She turned to Crusher and gasped, putting her hands over her mouth. “Oh no! I did make you sad!”

Crusher shook her head. “No. You didn’t. The people who should have welcomed you home with open arms but hurt you instead, they make me sad. And angry. And disappointed. You are utterly delightful and don’t you forget it,” she said in a playfully scolding tone with a smile as she brushed her tears away. She reached out both hands and was relieved when Anna offered forth her own right hand.

Crusher grasped it between hers and said, “Thank you for sharing that with me. I’m moved. Deeply, deeply moved. You have a real talent.”

Anna looked away. “Oh. Gosh. Thank you. That’s...that’s very kind of you to say.”

“I mean it. Every word. And I meant all the things I said before too. I didn’t know we were going to have quite this much of a heart-to-heart when I came down here but I’m glad we did. I hope you’re glad about it too.”

Anna nodded, but still looked a little uncertain about it all.

Crusher gave her hand a little squeeze. “Like I said, everything’s going to be okay. You’re not alone anymore. And I promise you, you can sing whatever song you need to, any time. I will always be a receptive audience for anything you need to sing or tell me. Okay? I mean it.”

Then she set Anna’s hand gently upon the table, and sat back. “Right. That said, I don’t want to overwhelm you any more than I already have. So I think maybe I should let you get back to resting in whatever way works for you,” she said as she gestured towards the scattered bits and pieces upon the table. “Remember what I said about how you can contact me for anything at any time, okay?”

“Yes ma’am,” Anna said with a nod.

“And you’re okay otherwise?”

“A little bit like this,” Anna said, her hands flapping in front of her face again to indicate high emotion, “but okay. I think maybe I really like you.”

Crusher stood, but bent forward to be very close to Anna as she said, “Sweetheart, I like you too.”

Anna beamed.

Crusher patted her shoulder and turned towards the door.

“Oh!” Anna suddenly said.

Crusher turned. “Yes?”

Anna stood up as well and hopped over to a nearby drawer. She pulled it open, pulled something out, then turned with it behind her back and gave Crusher a very sheepish, very guilty-little-child look. Then she took a deep breath and brought the object forward with two hands outstretched in offering.

Crusher approached and saw a heavily modified tricorder in Anna’s hands. “Ah,” she said as she picked it up and turned it on. “Oh...you’ve...you’ve taken a standard one and turned it into a medical one.”

“Yes ma’am,” Anna admitted.

Crusher began flicking through the various screens. "It's even got pretty much all of the basics."

"Mmhm," Anna said. She reached back into the drawer and offered forth a modified dermal regenerator.

"Oh my. That's quite the beast isn't it?" Crusher said playfully.

"Yeah, I guess. I wasn't going for elegance."

The doctor picked that up as well, turning it over to examine it. "You started with a residential one and gave it some real oomph."

Anna started twisting her fingers again. "Yes ma'am. Sorry."

Crusher smiled at her but firmly said, "Anna, don't you ever apologise for your ingenuity. You were only protecting yourself. Believe it or not, I do understand that. And I admire your honesty in showing me." She flicked the regenerator on, waved it over her own hand, and then scanned the result with the tricorder. She laughed softly. "It's...very impressive." She then looked directly at Anna and said, "You're very impressive." Then she stepped past Anna to put both of them back in the drawer.

Shocked, Anna asked, "You...don't need to confiscate them?"

"Not really. I trust you to call me first now and keep these only for a dire emergency when you can't get help any other way. I'd rather you break a minor regulation than bleed out or suffer needlessly. Besides, you clearly know how to use them. Who knows, maybe you'll save a life with them. I'm not going to stand in the way of that. As long as you do indeed promise to call for official help first," she said with a gently wagging finger.

"Oh yes ma'am," Anna said emphatically, ending with a one-legged curtsy. Wide-eyed with childlike excitement, she said, "I promise to always call you first. I swear it. I'll never use these unless...I don't know, the whole ship is under attack or something." Her enthusiasm suddenly faltered. "Although to be completely honest, I'd hide in the cupboard if that happened," she said indicating the one in the aft corner of the room.

"Good to know," Crusher said. "That's where I'll come find you."

Anna smiled shyly.

Crusher once again headed for the door, but turned as she got there. “Oh, and Anna?”

“Yes ma’am?”

“You also have my official permission to tinker around with what you’ve made and keep experimenting with any ideas you have for improvements. I’d love to see what you come up with.”

Anna beamed again, alight with excitement once more.

Crusher grinned back at her, and then left.



Stardate 47250.3 (Thursday 02/04/2370 08:57) — Sickbay

Crusher returned to sickbay with her head and heart so full from her experience with Anna that she wasn’t even sure how she got there. Discovering her office door in front of her, she chuckled slightly, realising she’d arrived entirely on autopilot.

“Everything all right, Doctor?” Ogawa asked from the console to the right.

“Hm?” Crusher asked, still somewhat dazed. “Oh, yes.” She gave herself a little shake and smiled at the nurse. “One of those days when I know that I’m absolutely in the right profession because I could truly help someone in need.” But then she noticed the tray of used medical equipment on the rolling cart beside Alyssa and said, “I see you’ve just had one of those times where you had to deal with something less than pleasant.”

“It’s all right, Doctor, I’m used to it,” Alyssa said with a smile as she finished entering her report on the console.

“Ensign Mabunda? His toe flared up again?”

“Mmhm. Left just before you came in. I think he ran away before you could see him and scold him about his shoes.”

Beverly rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “Just because those pointy toes fall within uniform regulations doesn’t mean they’re suitable for his feet.”

“The price some people are willing to pay for fashion, I guess,” Alyssa said with a little laugh as she dealt with the items on the cart.

“How bad was it?” Beverly asked.

Alyssa wrinkled her nose a little and held up a drainage tube briefly before setting it in the medical waste recycling unit.

“Lovely,” Beverly said. “Well, he’ll learn in time. They all do. Or they learn to ignore me and go into command.”

Alyssa laughed.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

Stardate 47250.6 (Thursday 02/04/2370 11:32) — Sickbay

When Crusher got around to updating Anna's medical record on the wall console, she noticed something in the uploaded tricorder scan when it was on the larger screen. She paused before marking the treatment as completed, her hand in mid-air as a fine network of lines in Anna's left hand caught her eye.

"Are those...fracture lines?" she asked aloud, though there was nobody nearby, with everyone off on rounds, in labs, or at lunch.

Crusher considered how Anna had been reluctant to let her left hand be examined at all, and that Data had said he had noticed that Anna didn't like that hand to be touched.

She was certain the burn she'd treated was fully healed, but it hadn't occurred to her to scan for any other damage.

"Computer, are the lines shown on this scan fracture marks?"

"*Analysing,*" the computer replied. A moment later it concluded, "*Hand scan shows multiple healed fracture points,*" as it magnified the image and labelled each one with little green pointers.

"Does the patient's record contain any mention of a broken hand?"

"*Negative,*" the computer replied.

"Does this scan match previous scans?"

"*There are no internal hand scan records for this patient available.*"

"External ones?"

"*Patient's hand prints were recorded upon admission to The Institute on Stardate —*"

"No that's fine," Crusher said. "You said the scan shows multiple healed fracture points. Analyse the nature of the fracture."

“Analysing,” the computer replied again. *“The hand appears to have been damaged with severe blunt-force trauma on four to eight occasions, followed by healing with a G147-B Bone Knitter.”*

“Four to eight?!” Crusher asked in shock.

*“The nature of the fracture lines and repeated healing renders an exact count impossible.”*

Crusher’s jaw hung open for a moment, and then she put her hand over her heart. “What the hell...” she muttered under her breath, and then asked, “Is the hand fully healed?”

*“Further scans and evaluation required.”*

“Okay, based on this scan alone, is the patient likely to be in pain or suffering any problems using her hand?”

The computer chirped for a moment, and then replied, *“There are no signs of permanent damage excepting the trace seams left by the G147-B device.”*

Crusher thought about Anna’s history, and then asked, “Evaluate likely age of the patient when the fractures occurred.”

The computer chirped again. *“There is a ninety-seven-point-three percent chance the injuries were applied to a hand that had reached full maturity.”*

Crusher nodded slowly. “All right. A teenage girl’s hand bones would normally be finished growing around age sixteen to eighteen. Anna was still on Covaris Two at that point. Computer, what age was Anna White when she was abducted by Robert Loxos?”

After another series of digital sounds, the computer reported, *“Anna White was abducted by Robert Loxos on approximate Stardate 44390.3 at the age of twenty-two years.”*

Crusher closed her eyes and gently pinched the top of her nose up against her forehead. “Twenty-two. That’s definitely a mature hand. Damn it. But then why is she hiding it?” She dropped her hand to her combadge and tapped it. “Crusher to Troi.”

*“I’m here. What do you need?”* came the reply.

“I know you’re really busy today, but can I borrow you for a minute in sickbay?”

*“On my way.”*



Stardate 47250.6 (Thursday 02/04/2370 11:34) — Deck Eight —  
Picard's Quarters

Hopeful that Beverly having met Anna meant he would get to do likewise soon, Picard returned to viewing Anna's logs with a mind to plough through at least a few more, even if they stung.

He was thus pleased to see that the file listings for the next three were very short, which gave him hope that they weren't filled with excessive theatrics that threatened to tear at his heart.

Anna's next log — the fifth in the set — was marked as Stardate 44334.9, which corresponded to the third of May, 2367, shortly before 0600. Picard's first thought was that she was up and busy early, but then he recalled that she seemed to keep to no sort of diurnal schedule, no doubt from growing up in perpetual sun. He cast aside preconceptions and began playback.

“Sorry for getting all...like that in the last log,” she said with a little shrug. “I thought about deleting it but I don't know if I'm allowed to do that. So...whatever. It is what it is.”

With a tired sigh she looked around at controls behind and below the imager. “This morning there was a temporary fault in one of the external hull plate waveguide conduits on the starboard side so...that was a little scary, briefly, on account of the potential for explosive decompression at warp should those deflective systems fail. But pretty much as soon as the alarm went my redundancy kicked in, just as it should, so I was able to reroute and repair remotely fairly easily.”

Picard chuckled at how she made advanced starship engineering sound as trivial as patching up a minor plumbing leak under a kitchen sink.

“Anyway,” she continued, “everything’s going fine now, I guess. I’m feeling a bit better, I think. Still cold, still scared, but kind of...more resolute to whatever I’m going to face back home. Or in here. Sort of just getting a bit numb to it all, in a way. I mean I’m trying to stay hopeful...”

She let out a sudden, bitter little laugh, and then shook her head. “No, not hopeful. Just stubborn, really. I wish I could say hope is what got me here but hope has come and gone so many times in my life that I don’t really see it as something to be relied on. It’s more like I’m just too stubborn to die.”

She scrunched her nose for a moment and then shrugged. “Mom’s logs are filled with her calling me ‘stubborn’ and ‘wilful’,” Anna said with the tone and expression of an annoyed teenager spitting such words back at a parent.

Then she looked right into the imager and said defiantly, “I guess that’s what saved me so...I’ll go with it.”

Picard thought, *Good lord, I can’t imagine how I’d have dealt with a sassy teenager, especially if she was this much like me at the same age.*

Anna looked down at her hands and swivelled the chair back and forth a bit as she flatly concluded, “Still no answer to my distress call. So...a normal day.” Then she abruptly ended the recording.

Picard immediately began the next one, which was dated Stardate 44338.3, midday the following day.

This time Anna looked more frazzled and less coldly confident than the previous entry.

“The hull plate fault flared back up,” she said, clearly frustrated. “I think maybe it’s a bad coupler between the conduit joins, but that’s not enough for me to be willing to spacewalk for, not when my redundancy system is holding. I’m not even going to pretend that I’m prepared to do that. I mean...I have the suit and I’ve told myself all along that if it came down to a choice between death or willingly...”

Anna went visibly pale on the recording. She closed her eyes and made a sound as if she was avoiding gagging. She bit her lip and her whole body shuddered. Then she took a deep breath and whispered, "...going out an airlock..." but another shudder overtook her and she had to pause again to take more deep breaths.

Then she repeated the words so rapidly that they blurred together, as if speaking them quickly somehow protected her from whatever horrified her.

"If it was death or airlock I would do it," she blurted.

After another deep breath she resumed normal speech. "I told myself I'd do it, but now...I don't know if I can. I'm afraid of being too afraid. I'm afraid of panicking and doing something stupid. I mean, this fault, it's probably my own stupidity that caused it. My own hubris, thinking I knew how to fix a spaceship all by myself, and now it's going to fail, and that's bad enough, but going out there and freaking out and dying because of freaking out...somehow, dying from my own panicked stupidity seems worse than dying from a technical fault even if that fault is because of my arrogant stupidity. But then I guess it's stupid not to try?"

She flapped her hands in front of her face, her anguish visceral. "I don't know. This is all really hard. It would really help if someone could please just hear my distress call already. What's wrong with all of you out there?" she asked into the imager. "Or...is anybody out there anymore?"

Anna put her hands firmly over her eyes and shook her head. "I've been singing all the songs about not being alone for all of these years but what if I am? What if everyone's gone? What am I supposed to do then?"

She balled her hands into fists and lightly began banging the sides of her head. "No, no, no. Sorry. I'm doing it again, getting myself all worked up over unlikely maybes. It's only day five out here and I'm already not coping. I think...I think I'm exhausted? Maybe I should try to sleep again. I keep failing at that. I'm so scared I'll miss something important if I do. Someone, please help me. I want to be found."

Picard sighed, thinking of how much training everyone in Starfleet underwent to be able to function on low sleep in emergency situations, and how Anna had none of that. He recalled how easily his own mind turned to irrational panic when he was exhausted, and wished he could reach back in time to tell Anna that there was nothing shameful — let alone “stupid” — about being afraid or confused in this situation.

“The whole bloody thing is ridiculous,” he muttered. *How was an untrained, lone child supposed to cope? How I wish she could know that she held up like a champion amidst these challenges*, he thought.

Feeling the urge rising once more to go to her and tell her these things, he instead loaded the seventh log in the series, marked as Stardate 44344.7, the sixth of May, 2367.

In this one, Anna looked more stable. Her hair was in neatened braids and though she still had bags under her eyes, her overall appearance gave the impression that she had indeed gotten some rest.

“It’s been a couple of days, I know,” she began apologetically. But then she wrinkled her nose and crossed her arms. “Do I have to do these every day? I already hate doing it. I feel like I’m talking to someone who will probably never be there and that’s making me go insane.”

She grumbled and looked away. “Talking to myself, to the computer, singing with my Aunties all this time, that I could get by with. Talking now as if someone else might be listening but I will never know if they do...it’s really wearing me down,” she said sadly.

Then she rolled her eyes and looked to the console to the left of the imager. “So...fine. I’m reporting that I was able to do a nanite reroute on the problematic hull coupling. Turns out it was a cold-weld problem. So just like Auntie Julie said as Maria, I had to *start at the very beginning, a very good place to start*,” she sang. “*When you read you begin with A-B-C. When you nanoweld you begin*

*with...Au-Ag-C-twelve,”* she finished awkwardly with a little smirk.

“Anyway I found some possible issues with my home-brew grapheme fibres so once I accounted for that I was able to send some fresh nanites into the system to patch it up well enough for now. I might have to take a break from warp at some point and do a full system check but right now my board’s showing no faults, so I was able to get some sleep.

“The sleep really helped, but I also decided I need to back off of these logs a bit, sorry. I need to focus and not pretend anyone’s out there listening. I’ll record important stuff but...sorry, I can’t keep blabbing into the void every day.”

That was the end of the recording, and sure enough there were no more logs until nine days later, on Stardate 44368.0, the fifteenth of May, 2367, about 0740. Something about that date felt familiar to Picard but he couldn’t remember what, so he began the video.

In this one, Anna looked much more like she had before she’d launched: more in control, assured, and definitely less exhausted.

“Well, I didn’t make my original goal of getting off of Covaris before my twentieth birthday,” she said, “but here I am at my twenty-second and I’ve done it.”

*Oh that’s it,* Picard thought. *I meant to make a mental note of her birthday when I first read her file. The fifteenth of May. Right. Her birthday is the fifteenth of May,* he repeated silently to himself to commit it to memory. *If she’s mine, I’d bloody well not forget it.*

Anna continued, “I’ll even clear the old demarkation line for the Delta Triangle later tonight. Yay me for getting my ship out of the old historical mystery zone,” she said giving two thumbs up and a joyless smirk to the imager. “Actually, yay for this century’s better sensor tech. The reality is, it’s super, super empty here.”

She waved her hands dismissively at the space around her.

“Anyway, it’s weird. I feel...so much older than I’ve ever felt before, but also more lost and alone than ever too. *I’m just like a child who is lost in a wood,*” she sang, mimicking Cosette’s higher

voice. “Except I’d give anything to have actual trees around me. Gosh, I think...yeah...I forget what trees are like in real life. Wow.”

She stared into nothingness. “Everything about being on Covaris was so hard but it was...normal. I was there too long and it became normal and now I don’t know anything about anything anymore, except for what’s in the movies and I know they’re not real so...yeah.”

Anna shrugged and looked down. “Fixing the hull problem has made me feel better about my technical ability, but the closer I get to inhabited worlds, the more uncertain I feel about any ability to relate to other people anymore. I don’t know who I am or how I fit in, and that never bothered me before because I was so busy just getting launched. Now I sit here and sit here and sit here and I feel...”

Softly she sang to the tune of “Memory”, “*All alone in the moonlight, I can smile at the old days, I was less confused then.*” She chuckled. “But there’s no moon out here, just stars. Endless stars, way far away in the distance, *in their multitudes, scarce to be counted, filling the darkness with order and light!*” she sang again, her voice deep and heavy with the change in song. “*You are the sentinels, silent and sure, keeping watch in the night, keeping watch in the night.*”

“*You know your place in the sky, you hold your course and your aim, and each in your season returns and returns, and is always the same.*”

She fell silent once more for a time, creating an awkward silence Picard wished he could fill.

Finally she said, “Well, not much of a birthday again this year, I s’pose. But maybe someday this day will mean something good to someone.”

And with that, she ended the log.

Picard considered playing the next one, but as he weighed up how much more literal and figurative *Les Miserables* he could take, a tantalisingly mundane email message popped up on his

terminal from HQ, so he set aside Anna's logs once more to attend to much easier tasks instead.



Stardate 47250.6 (Thursday 02/04/2370 11:47) — Sickbay

"Everything okay?" Troi asked as she entered. "You seem tense."

"I am," Crusher replied, still staring at Anna's hand scan on the screen. "In all of your files on Anna, have you ever come across anything about her hands?"

"Her hands?"

"Yes. Specifically her left, but anything at all?"

Deanna thought deeply and then answered, "No, I don't believe so. Why?"

Crusher pointed to the console on the wall. "I saw her this morning. Oh, she's doing much better by the way."

"Well that's good."

"Yes, we actually had a very intense but very good heart-to-heart."

"That's very good!"

"It is. But I only realised when I was checking the scan of her arm that she's had multiple fractures to her left hand, and she likes to keep it hidden. Even Data's commented on that."

"That's very odd," Deanna said, looking at the console.

"It is. I can't be certain of the cause, but somehow she broke this hand multiple times and had it properly repaired." Beverly pointed to the screen. "See, here, here, and here? That's not newbie-with-a-knitter work. That's skilled medical repair."

"Which means you think she didn't do this to herself," Deanna surmised.

"She doesn't have any particular history of self-harm, does she?"

“No, quite the opposite. She’s a determined survivalist.”

Beverly nodded. “She does twist her fingers tightly when she’s nervous, though. I saw that this morning. But I got her to relax them and I doubt she’s ever broken anything doing it.”

“So her hand isn’t bothering her?”

“Not physically from what I can tell. But whatever happened, I think she’s ashamed about it. And it’s definitely in the last few years, since adulthood.”

Deanna sighed. “That indicates Loxos, most likely.”

“I thought about that, but it’s not something that came up in the evidence at his trial,” Beverly said awkwardly. “Could someone at The Institute have done something to her?”

“Oh I don’t think like this, no,” Deanna said. “As bad as Dr. Rundell was, as psychologically abusive and completely devoid of professional ethics as he was, I don’t think he physically abused any of the people he was studying there. Gaslighting them, confining them, misreporting their needs, yes, but physical torture leaving this kind of damage? Not that I’ve ever heard of.”

Beverly nodded. “Plus Anna did vocally defend herself in the case against Rundell and The Institute, so presumably she’d have mentioned it if this was done there. She never gave formal testimony against Loxos, though. Only what she told the people on the Fleming when they rescued her, and bits and pieces to others after.”

“That leaves Loxos as the most likely culprit,” Deanna said.

“I know but...there’s nothing in his recordings about her hand,” Beverly said, crossing her arms tightly and biting her bottom lip in grave concern.

Deanna shifted to try to look Beverly in the eye, but the latter avoided eye contact. Deanna took a deep breath and exuded a deliberately calming demeanour. “Beverly, how is it that you know so much about what’s in those recordings? This isn’t the first time you’ve hinted that you’ve seen them.”

Beverly sighed. “When I graduated at the Academy, I did what a lot of medical graduates do: I put myself down for legal opinions

if necessary. And being the very self-assured, naive young doctor that I was, I ticked all the boxes. Over the years I've had several random assignments, mostly pretty boring stuff like confirming that a dose of a medication given was too low or too high, or stating my opinion of a given procedure.

"But then a couple of years ago I was specifically requested as a high-ranking Starfleet doctor to give an opinion on a particularly...egregious case. I was warned it was awful and graphic, that it contained sexual assault, and that I didn't have to accept. But I thought to myself that I ought to help that kind of victim, so I agreed."

"Oh Beverly," Deanna said gently.

"It was..." Beverly closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. "It was horrible. Absolutely, gut-wrenchingly bad. I was given counselling before and after, but..." She opened her eyes again, looked at Deanna, and shrugged.

"I think I remember you being very stressed and telling me you were dealing with a restricted assignment, but that you had support for it."

"Mmhm, that's the one. And it's still restricted. I'm only telling you now because I know you have access to the victim's files."

"It's restricted because there are perverts out there who have tried to purchase those videos," Deanna said with a visible shudder.

Beverly shuddered as well. "Anyway, because Loxos was trying to argue that the restraints he used on her were 'medically necessary' and he had two clearly corrupt medical officials from outside of Federation control testifying to that, the prosecution wanted high-end expert opinion otherwise. They asked seven of us, and didn't tell us who the others are so there could be no accusation of collusion. Our names don't appear in the official record, just to the legal teams involved.

"We were given several videos and stills and asked if there was any valid reason for restraints to have been used. In the end all seven of us said no, absolutely not. But in all of that material there was nothing about her hand being injured."

“But Loxos didn’t record everything he did to her. He had her for weeks but only made a few recordings. Who knows what else he did to her?” Deanna said sadly.

Beverly nodded. “Yeah. You’re right. My heart breaks for her constantly.”

Deanna put a kindly hand on Beverly’s shoulder.

“I also have a professional ethics dilemma now,” Beverly said. “I didn’t mean to find this, and I don’t want to ask her about it and have her think I was snooping around her arm as part checking her burn post-treatment. The last thing I want when trying to gain her trust is for her to think I’ve violated her privacy.”

Deanna patted Beverly’s shoulder and then withdrew her hand. “You have a legitimate medical interest and obviously weren’t ‘snooping’ but you’re right, there’s a risk she’d see it that way, given her understandable lack of faith in medical personnel.”

“Loxos may have been the first doctor she ever met,” Beverly grumbled bitterly.

“Most likely. I think you’re right that you should continue focusing on trust-building for now. In my professional opinion, I advise you to make a note of this in her file in case something ever comes up about her hand again, but otherwise leave it there as a private notation. Assuming she isn’t having hand issues now other than the psychological trauma of hiding it.”

“As far as I can tell she has full use of the hand and even supports herself by both hands when not using the prosthetic leg. She likely doesn’t even know I can see this. She’s made herself a medical tricorder but it takes one of these professional-tier ones to even notice the fusion lines from a knitter.”

Deanna raised her eyebrows. “She made herself one?”

Beverly waived a dismissive hand. “I’ve given her permission to keep playing with scanning toys. We’re all better off when little engineers are allowed to play. She’s very unlikely to discover these lines and even if she does, she knows the cause so it’s not like it’d reveal anything to her.”

“Then unless this information becomes medically relevant to you, I’d say leave it be. I know that feels awful but for now, it’s the best choice we have.”

“I can’t tell the captain either. It’s private medical information now.”

“Exactly. And there’s no value in adding to his...stress about her.”

Beverly groaned, leaned forward, and tapped the console to close the patient file. “I hate this. I just want to make everything better for her. And him,” she admitted.

“I know. We all do. But she’s fragile and prone to running.”

Beverly nodded. “And the last thing any of us wants is for her to run away from us now. I don’t think I could live with myself if I caused that.” She smirked and added, “I almost pushed too hard, too fast this morning as it is.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I’ll tell you what I can later. But I’m not going to dump wishful-mom stuff on you when you need to go collect your own mom soon.”

Deanna tipped her head back, rolled her eyes, and groaned. “She’s being so...*Lwaxana* right now.” Then she took a deep breath and said, “But I’m hopeful once this stuff with the Cairn is done with, I can convince her to take a break and be...less.”

Beverly chuckled. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

Deanna headed for the exit and waved her hand. “I don’t think there’s a cure for any of that.”



Stardate 47251.5 (Thursday 02/04/2370 19:08) — Deck Twelve

“And that’s when we finally had the essential breakthrough towards facilitating the communication strategy the Cairn had been

hoping for,” Lwaxana said tiredly, walking arm-in-arm down the corridor with Deanna.

“I’m very happy for you all that you were able to make that happen,” Deanna said, also tiredly but for different reasons.

“Their world is so beautiful but I had to spend so much of my time there sitting, concentrating, working. Oh Little One, you can’t possibly have even the slightest idea of how exhausting it can be dealing with situations like that, where you have to put on a smile and keep going even though you’re desperate for a break.”

Deanna put on her best mother-pleasing smile and said, “Mhm.”

“That’s why I need this relaxation time. This walk, and then...what are you showing me in that holo-contraption again?”

“A nice, relaxing garden tea for you, Mother. Exactly what you asked for.”

“Right. Good. I...oh.” Lwaxana stopped and frowned deeply.

“What is it?” Deanna asked, concerned at her mother’s worse-than-usual flaky memory since her arrival.

Lwaxana let go of Deanna’s arm and walked further down the corridor, staring intently at the wall as she went. She paused again, concentrated, and then turned back to Deanna. “There’s somebody in there.”

“Yes, Mother,” Deanna explained patiently. “There are Jeffries tubes all over the ship. If you sense someone, it’s most likely an engineer or —”

Lwaxana shook her head. “No. This is...there’s a frightened little mouse in there.”

“A mouse?” Deanna asked incredulously.

“Not literally,” Lwaxana said, irritated. “A girl, or young lady, and...she’s frightened. She’s hiding in there...she’s coming up and doesn’t want to be seen doing so.” Lwaxana’s eyes went wide. “She’s frightened of you! And...Jean-Luc! Because...” She gasped and her jaw dropped. For a rare moment in time, Lwaxana Troi was completely speechless.

Deanna hurried to her, “Mother, hush! And get out of people’s private thoughts! I —”

“Excuse me,” came Worf’s voice as he rounded the curve and approached them. “Ambassador, Counselor. I do not mean to sound rude, but I am waiting for someone who...may not be comfortable with...others.” He gave a knowing look to Deanna and explained further, “Specialist White is on her way up to Gymnasium Four to attend further self-defence classes. I have encouraged her to come up despite being on post-injury rest so I can demonstrate some of the exercises I have designed specifically for her.”

“Who?” Lwaxana ask, annoyed at the interruption.

“Forgive me, Ambassador, but Specialist White remains frightened of encountering people in this section. I anticipate her arrival out of the Jefferies port momentarily. If you would be so kind as to use another corridor for the next few minutes —”

“Mr. Woof, do you have any idea —”

“That’s fine, Worf, thank you,” Deanna interceded quickly, taking her mother’s arm again and tugging her backwards. “It’s very good of you to take such good care of Anna. This way, Mother!”

Worf nodded respectfully and went back down the other way to wait between the Jefferies exit and the entrance to Gymnasium Four.

Deanna dragged Lwaxana back the way they came and then down an adjoining corridor. Once there she hissed, “Mother! You need to leave this situation alone!”

Lwaxana eyed Deanna for a moment and then spoke to her mind-to-mind, *You know, don’t you? That whoever that is, she’s Jean-Luc’s daughter?!*

*You keep that to yourself, Mother! That’s a very closely guarded secret! You can’t go around reading human minds like that!*

*Well I hardly meant to. She’s practically screaming her thoughts.*

*We don’t even know for sure if he is her father!*

*She's quite sure of it. The poor creature is utterly terrified she'll see him and he'll reject her.*

There was a soft noise down the other corridor. Lwaxana leaned over to try to peek, but Deanna took ahold of her arm again and pulled her further away.

"What?" Lwaxana said aloud. "You can't blame me for being curious about wanting to see what his child looks like."

"Mother!" Deanna growled between her teeth. "Hush!" Returning to psychic speech, she said, *We don't know what she knows. We don't know what's true or supposition. All we know is that she's set some boundaries and we are respecting them while she gets settled. For now, Anna's keeping things a secret and we need to respect that.*

Lwaxana waved her hand dismissively. *Little One, you needn't fuss so about me. I do know how to keep a secret, you know. I've kept many more than you can possibly fathom.*

Deanna glared. *It is my job — no more than that — it is my sacred duty to protect vulnerable people like Anna. It is very important that you forget what you just learned. You aren't to interfere at all, not with the captain, not with Anna, not with anybody. This isn't your business until either of them invites you to it, do you understand?*

*Fine, fine, there's no need to get so upset! I don't understand why you're acting like this.* Lwaxana threw her hands up in the air.

But Deanna refused to back down as she usually did. *Mother, I'm serious. Anna White is afraid of me because of exactly what you just did to her, even though I can't do what you did. She won't let me help her because she's afraid I'll violate her privacy and read her mind.*

Lwaxana sighed, rolled her eyes, and waved dismissively again. *Deanna, humans are far too worried about what they perceive as secrets even when their own words and body language reveal everything. Plus they leave their most dire secrets right there in their surface thoughts. If they really cared about keeping secrets*

*properly, they'd do what any civilised creature does and hide it all away properly, behind well-established psychic locks.*

Deanna crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. *That's not healthy, not for anyone, not even Betazoids.*

But Lwaxana ignored her and started walking towards the holodeck corridor. She ordered out loud and quite firmly, “Come along then. I want that tea. And something stronger to go with it.”

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Stardate 47253.2 (Friday 03/04/2370 09:43) — Deck Thirty-Nine  
— Cargo Bay Twelve

Anna started her morning by trying to find something to do in main engineering, but she couldn't concentrate because of all of the gossiping about what Ambassador Troi was seen wearing the day before.

Anna had no idea why the ambassador's clothing would be of interest to anyone. The only thing she knew for certain about any Betazoid was that she didn't want to be anywhere near mind-readers or even discuss them, so she crept back out of engineering in search of safer spaces.

She slid down the ladder rails in the main vertical Jefferies tube to Deck Thirty-Nine and headed to Mack's cargo bay. Once there she stood outside the open door awkwardly for a moment, before loudly saying, "Um, knock knock?"

Mack peeked out from behind a shelf.

"Um, hi?" Anna said. "Is it okay if I visit you?"

Mack smiled warmly and nodded.

Anna entered the cargo bay and then bit her lip. She laughed nervously and said, "Thing is, I'm really bad at initiating social stuff."

Mack shrugged shyly.

Anna nodded. "Yeah, see, I think you are too. And since I'm supposed to be 'resting' but that's boring, I thought I should go do something social, and that maybe if you and I both find it tricky to do this kind of thing that maybe we could practice it together without Aisling and Andrea filling all the gaps. Maybe. If that's okay."

Mack nodded happily again.

Anna bounced on her toes a little and gave a small squeeze of joy. “Yay! Okay. Um...oh! I have an idea for something we could talk about, because I noticed it the first time I came in here, to make those flooring panels? Do you remember?”

Mack blushed a little and nodded.

Completely failing to notice the blush, Anna continued, “I really liked the look of your sorting system, and I really, really enjoy sorting things, so I thought maybe you could tell me all about your system? If that’s okay?”

Mack’s eyes went wide.

“Oh gosh!” Anna said quickly, her hands flying to cover her mouth. “Did I ask for something bad?”

Mack shook her head and shifted side to side. “It’s just...nobody’s ever asked before. Not even other cargo personnel. They just...use it.”

“Oh.” Anna looked at the shelves and their incredibly neat stacks, all with labels. “Well, the thing is, the best sorting makes it so you don’t even notice the system. Kind of like you don’t notice breathing. So probably nobody asked because it’s so easy for them to find stuff.”

Mack’s entire posture softened as a dopey-happy smile took over her face. “That’s the nicest thing I’ve ever heard anyone say.”

“Is it? Well, I can say it lots and lots if you like! Like, look at this!” Anna said, pointing to one of the bin stacks that had labels on the bins and also coloured tags hanging out, all lined up to their edges in groups by colour. “You’ve got it all so matchy-matchy! I love matchy-matchy!” She stood on her tiptoes to read one of the tags. Then she stood down, her face screwed in thought. “I don’t know what a Type X Submaster Flow Regulator Kit is, but I know now that if I ever need them, they’re red-tagged in Bin 12-2-D in your system.”

Mack grinned. “It’s part of emergency ship’s phaser stuff. Takes time to replicate all the pieces, so we keep them ready in case of battle damage.” She looked down, stuffed her hands in her pockets, and more shyly added, “I don’t think anybody knows what bin has

‘em except me. It’s my job to have that stuff ready if an engineer comes looking for it.”

“Oh I get it,” Anna said. “You don’t just organise, you distribute.”

Mack grinned and nodded.

“Can I make a guess about something?”

Mack nodded again.

“I bet you have bins of those in different places on the ship so you can deliver them from all over in an emergency.”

Mack grinned widely once more, but then quietly added, “Not just me, though. Other cargo folks know too. A few, anyway.”

“But see, that’s what I meant! Those other cargo people, they’re not thinking about your system because you do it so well that they just know where stuff goes! That’s amazing!”

Mack’s grin expanded so hard, she had to squeeze her eyes shut. Then she gave herself a shake and said, “Makes me so happy...can’t talk!”

Anna bounced on her toes some more. “I know what that’s like! So I do this!” she said as she continued to bounce, but added flapping hands and a squeak of joy.

Mack sighed. “I can’t do that.”

Anna stopped. “Why not?”

Mack shrugged again, and then idly scratched at the long scar on the left side of her face. “‘Cause you’re little and cute. Little, cute people can do little, cute things. Nobody wants to see The Hulk be cute. It’s not cute. It’s...weird.”

“The Hulk?” Anna asked, confused.

“Traditional comic hero. Big, giant, strong guy with green skin. Can’t control his anger so he smashes things up but in a good guy way...mostly.”

“And...because you’re big and strong you think you have to be like that too?”

Mack shrugged and said, as if by rote, “Everyone has to fit where they fit.”

Anna’s brow furrowed. “What? Who told you that?”

Mack shrugged again.

“Hm. I don’t think it’s right. You oughta be whoever you want to be and not listen to mean people who say you can’t be happy in any way you want to be happy.” But then Anna paused, thought for a moment, screwed her mouth to the side, and muttered, “Wait, though...probably I shouldn’t say that because maybe that makes me one of the mean people telling you how to be?” She shook her head. “I don’t know, it’s all confusing.”

Mack nodded sadly.

Anna took a step closer to her and said, “But I promise I won’t think it’s weird if you want to be happy any way at all and I don’t care how big you are. I wish I was bigger. I couldn’t reach these top shelves but you can. If you want to tell me all about the stuff on the shelves and how you sorted it and all about traditional heroes in comics then I’d love to hear about all of it.”

Mack’s jaw dropped. She whispered, “You wanna hear about ancient comic book heroes?”

“Absolutely!” Anna said enthusiastically. “I love sorting and tinkering but I love stories even more. Why, I’ll sit here and listen to you tell me stories for hours and hours if you want. If I’m not in your way.”

“Really?” Mack asked desperately.

“Really really! I know a little bit about those old stories, but not much. I know about Spiderman because there was a musical and...” She winced. “Oh, it’s quite bad. But I actually watched a whole series about other characters once because it was practically a musical!” She furrowed her brow again. “It was very confusing because I didn’t know all the back stories, but the music was so good because it was by Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez and they wrote the songs for *Frozen* which is one of my favourite-favourites. I can’t remember how it went, though, something about a witches’ road...”

“Agatha,” Mack whispered reverentially. “You watched *Agatha All Along*.”

“Maybe?” Anna answered with a wide shrug. “I don’t remember the story. I’d have to re-learn the song to be able to sing it. But if you want you can tell me all the stuff that I was obviously missing. Or different stories. Whatever you like.”

Mack thought for a moment, and then backed up towards the rear of her shelf stacks, beckoning Anna with her hand as she went.

Anna followed.

Mack went to the shelves against the starboard wall and shifted two stacks of bins, revealing a poster on the wall behind. She pointed to it worshipfully.

Anna looked and saw a woman in red, gold, and blue, her dark hair blowing in the wind, hands gripping a glowing rope.

“Wonder Woman,” Mack said in an awestruck voice. “She’s my hero. I wanna be an Amazon warrior just like Wonder Woman.”

“I’d love to hear all about her,” Anna said eagerly, but matching Mack’s tone of veneration.

With dewey eyes Mack said, “I could tell you all her stories while also showing you sorting stuff.”

“I’d love that.”

Mack let out a strangled squeak, imitated Anna’s earlier bounce and hand-wiggles slightly, and then looked to Anna for approval.

Anna bounced some more and applauded loudly.

With a confident tone and posture that absolutely nobody on board had ever witnessed before or even knew that Mack could muster, she smacked her big, strong hand on the side of the shelf where a bin was marked 1-1-A and announced, “We begin here!”



Stardate 47253.4 (Friday 03/04/2370 11:52) — Deck Thirty-Nine  
— Cargo Bay Twelve

“Wow,” Anna said breathlessly. “That was amazing!”

Mack grinned, having finished another major story arc from the Wonder Woman comics. She'd been interrupted twice by people coming to the cargo bay and needing her help to locate items, but because she knew where everything was they were both gone in seconds. Other than the mid-morning announcement that the ship was leaving Starbase 219, the rest of the time in the cargo bay was quiet and to themselves.

Anna's intense listening and emotional reactions to the ups and downs of the story plus her abundant appreciation of the sorting system had inspired Mack to speak longer than she had otherwise done in her entire life. It was a friendship-cementing event for both of them, but also somewhat exhausting for two people unused to extensive social time.

Anna put her hands over her stomach and giggled. "Did you hear that?"

Mack shook her head.

Anna snorted a little laugh. "Apparently I got absolutely ravenously starving imagining all of those Amazons punching all of those Nazis! We should go have lunch!"

A gasp of delight came from just outside the cargo bay door.

The two women looked at each other in surprise, but Mack seemed to know what was up. She strode across the bay just in time to see Aoife there, trying to sneak down the corridor. Mack grunted an admonishment and stood towering over the small child, hands on her hips in an attempt at a scolding posture.

Anna came around as well. "Aoife!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing down here?! You're supposed to be in school, aren't you?"

Aoife scrunched up her nose and whined, "It was being boring! I came down here to find your secret hideout!"

"Secret hideout?" Anna asked. "What secret hideout?"

"I heard Daddy call it that and Mom laughed so it's probably true. You all have a secret hideout where you have lunch and cookies!"

Anna and Mack looked at each other, each trying to hide a guilty little shrug.

“I knew it!” Aoife said. “I came down and listened to the story and then I thought you were about to go to the hideout but then you saw me,” she grumbled.

“It’s just a room where some of us can eat without being interrupted,” Anna explained. “It’s nothing so exciting as a ‘secret hideout’. Come on,” she said reaching out a hand. “I think I’d better return you to school.”

“No!” Aoife protested, crossing her arms defiantly. “It’s boring.”

Mack muttered, “I’ll call Aisling.”

“No fair!” Aoife whined. “I just want to hang out with interesting people. Is that so wrong?” she shouted, holding her arms out before her dramatically.

Mack smiled a little at being called “interesting” and paused before tapping her combadge.

“Okay, how about I take you back to your quarters instead?” Anna offered. “We can go slow. Like a mini-playdate. And then wait for one of your parents to come there.”

Aoife wrinkled her nose again, but then grudgingly conceded and took Anna’s hand.

Anna looked back at Mack in the cargo bay door, nodded, and headed to the nearest turbolift. She would have preferred to use the Jefferies tube, but didn’t dare risk Aoife’s safety. Plus she anticipated the turbolift would be a quick ride up to Deck Twenty-Three.

“Mack’s calling Mom, isn’t she?” Aoife asked as they stepped into the turbolift.

“Probably,” Anna said. “And I’m betting your teachers have already started looking for you anyway.”

Aoife sighed heavily, as if the weight of the world was upon her.

Anna said, “You know, it’s not all bad having parents and teachers and others who care about where you are and what you’re doing and if you’re okay.”

“I guess,” Aoife muttered.

“I always wished for a family like yours. I always wished I could go to school.” As the turbolift doors opened to Deck Twenty-Three Anna conceded, “But I suppose everyone wishes for what they don’t have. It probably sounds exciting to kids who have happy, safe homes to imagine growing up in their very own spaceship, all to themselves.”

Aoife shrugged. “I want my own spaceship so I can make the rules, but I wouldn’t want to be alone on it. That part sounds bad.”

Anna nodded as they stepped into the corridor. “But sometimes I would —”

“There you are!” Kajus shouted, his voice echoing down the corridor and making Anna instinctively cower back. He marched up to them both and snatched Aoife’s hand out of Anna’s, as the latter retreated defensively away from the angry man.

“Daddy, I’m fine!” Aoife protested as he began to pull her towards their quarters.

He thrust an accusatory finger at Anna and barked, “You stay away from my daughter!”

“Daddy! Rude!” Aoife shouted, stomping her foot and twisting her hand out of his grip. “Anna didn’t do anything but bring me here! I snuck down there and listened to Mack tell stories about a magic super lady!”

Kajus shook his head incredulously. “Don’t lie, Aoife. I happen to know that Mack doesn’t talk enough to ‘tell stories’.”

“But she did! It was awesome! So much better than school!”

Kajus bent down and picked Aoife up. The child groaned and went limp, flopping back out of his arms, whining, “Daaaadyyy, why don’t you listen?”

“Your mother will be here in a minute,” he said as their quarters door closed behind them, leaving Anna alone in the corridor.

It took her a minute to resume breathing, but then panic gave way to anger. She let out a low growl, thought, *Well you're welcome, you big jerk*, and then headed towards the Jefferies tube, her appetite for both food and further social time obliterated for the rest of the day.



Stardate 47255.6 (Saturday 04/04/2370 07:10) — Deck Thirty-Seven — Cargo Bays

“Are you serious?” Aisling asked with wide eyes.

“Yeah, it was pretty uncomfortable,” Geordi said.

Data nodded. “Diplomatic banquets often feature some amount of tension, but the manner in which Ambassador Troi introduced Counselor Troi to Cairn Senior Diplomat Maques was...very strange, even for such an event. When he told Counselor Troi that Ambassador Troi had told him that her daughter was ‘seeking a husband,’ it clearly made Counselor Troi observably uncomfortable.”

“Yeeugh,” Aisling muttered.

The three of them were gathered in the cargo bay to alter the log notes on several pallets that had come in from Starbase 219 but had been erroneously earmarked to a project that wasn’t ready for them, whereas some researchers on Deep Space Four were eager to have them. Normally such work would fall to lower-ranked staff but because one of the research team was a prominent Daystrom scientist and the equipment was all within engineering’s scope, Riker had asked Geordi and Data to ensure it all got transferred over. And since one of the pallets contained items requiring security observation, Worf — who was busy with Cairn security — asked Aisling to assist.

“I’m not against being introduced to potential dates,” Geordi said, “but not like that, with marriage already mentioned.”

“It has long seemed as if ensuring a ‘good match’ for her daughter is of prime importance to Ambassador Troi,” Data said. Then he tilted his head and added, “Ambassador Troi does seem to enjoy weddings.”

“That’s uh...one way to put it, Data,” Geordi said as Mack entered through the main door. “Oh hey, are you here to help us?”

Mack looked baffled, but then shrugged and nodded.

“We’ll brief you, don’t worry,” Aisling said, approaching Mack. “It’s admin stuff. Nothing requires moving, I don’t think?” she asked over her shoulder at the other two.

“I don’t think so,” Geordi said. “Not unless it’s hard to find in here.”

Mack raised an eyebrow.

“I’m entirely certain he didn’t mean to insult you,” Aisling teased.

“What?!” Geordi asked. “Oh...no! I meant —”

“I’m just needling you,” Aisling said with a laugh.

Mack grinned at Geordi to indicate she was not offended.

Data appeared perplexed, but then suddenly delighted. The others all turned to see Anna entering behind Mack.

“Oh good, it’s you!” Aisling said, hurrying to Anna and beckoning her aside.

Anna twisted her mouth to the side awkwardly, but went as Aisling directed.

“Listen,” Aisling said softly. “I’m really sorry about yesterday.”

Anna shrugged. “I don’t mind kids being kids. It’s fine.”

“No, I meant the part where Kajus was impolite.”

“Impolite?” Anna asked with undisguised resentment at the understated word.

Aisling winced. “Oh shit, was he worse than impolite? Aoife said he was rude but that he said he hardly said anything.”

Anna shrugged again. “I don’t really feel like talking about him anymore.”

“Yeah. Okay, fair.” She leaned in closer, “Did Mack really talk about comic book stuff for a long time?”

Anna nodded.

Aisling's jaw dropped. She stared at Anna as if she'd unlocked a magical treasure chest, but before she could ask for details Data came over to ask, "Is your arm better?"

Anna's coldness melted away in an instant as she smiled at Data. "Mmhm. I promised to be a very good girl for Doctor Crusher and make sure not to do anything too strenuous, so I figured I'd come see what you were all up to in here."

"We are seeking specific items for re-entry into our exchange system. You are welcome to assist, if that pleases you," Data said, holding out a tricorder.

"I'd love to," Anna said, taking it from him.

Aisling shrugged and went back over to work with Geordi.

Data held up a PADD. "I have a list. We should begin over here," he said, pointing to one of the aisles.

*"You've got a little list, you've got a little list,"* Anna sang softly as she followed him.

"Hm?" he asked.

"It's a Gilbert and Sullivan thing," she replied.

Data's head twitched back and forth slightly and then he said, "Ah. *The Mikado*."

"Yeah," Anna said. "Hugely problematic in lots of ways but...catchy."

Data nodded and showed her the items on the PADD, so she set to looking through the stacks.

"Here's one of the sets already," Geordi said.

"Is it one I need to check off?" Aisling asked.

"Not sure," Geordi replied. "Hey Data, can you come help me check it out?" Then he turned to Mack and said, "It's packed so well."

Mack responded with an exaggerated, preening grin.

Data went to help him with the heavy crate as Anna continued scanning along the piles.

Aisling watched Anna, considering trying again to get some intel on how to get Mack to talk so much. Then she saw Anna's

demeanour suddenly change. Anna looked upset, adjusted her tricorder, scanned the stacks on either side of her repeatedly, and then — with a full-body cringe — began to back away slowly as if she'd discovered a dangerous creature.

“Anna, what’s wrong? You like everyone in this room,” Aisling said, heading over to her.

The others all paused their work to see what was going on as well.

Continuing to step back slowly, Anna said, “It’s not the people. It’s that we’re standing inside a giant bomb right now.”

“Bomb?!” Aisling said, hurrying her pace.

But Anna held out an arm to prevent Aisling from going past her. She shook her head and pointed at several pallets.

“Oh, no, Anna, it’s okay,” Geordi said, coming to her as well. “Your tricorder probably picked up the ablative hull plates in here. Those are designed to —”

Anna turned to him and snapped, “I know what ablative hull plates are. I know how they work. I had to repack some on the Baltimore. I know they repel incoming ordinance by exploding outwards on contact, so they’re filled with explosives.”

Geordi continued to explain, “Right, but it’s only a tiny amount. We’re safe.”

“That is *not* a small amount,” Anna emphasised, still upset and thrusting her tricorder’s screen towards him. “Especially not in aggregate.”

Geordi’s brow furrowed. “What the hell?” he asked as he took the tricorder from her. Data came from the other side and they both began to scan the stacks.

“Those plates are perfectly legal or else we wouldn’t have approved them on board,” Aisling said. “I was here when those were loaded on. They were scanned at the time.”

“Yeah, and I’m only seeing the ultritium 283 in them within the limit of safety protocols,” Geordi said. “Where’d you get this ultritium 342 reading, Anna?”

“You’ve got to set it to the RCSV Level Four setting to see the 342,” she said. “I did that because Data’s search list included cases of gluon collector baskets so I figured that’d find those faster.”

Geordi and Data looked at each other, and then each set their tricorders to the alternate settings.

“Whoa, okay, yeah, there’s...kind of a lot of ultritium 342 in here,” Geordi admitted.

“That is not a standard ablative component,” Data said.

“No, but we do ship it for other reasons now and then. It’s a terraforming explosive,” Geordi said. “It needs a microwave pulse ignition, and this whole room is shielded against that.”

Data’s brow went up. “Ultritium 283 is used commonly for mining,” he said in a very pointed fashion to Geordi.

“Yeah, I guess it —” Geordi cut himself off. “Right. Mining. Noted.”

“It doesn’t matter what else it can be used for,” Anna protested. “If you mix 283 and 342 in the right proportions — and those are the right proportions in there! — you get ultritium 584 which doesn’t need a full-on microwave pulse because the right radio wave can set that stuff off, which is why it’s very, very illegal!”

“Hell yeah it is,” Aisling said.

Across the room, Mack took a step backwards away from the stacks.

“Right, but they’re not combined in the plates,” Geordi said. “I mean it’s weird that the plates have both but —”

“They practically are combined!” Anna said. “There’s only a thin duranium layer between the two types in there, I checked! If that inner plate is at all misaligned or punctured, just moving these things around might be enough to jiggle some of the 283 and 342 together. I know all this because the Baltimore had this stuff on board! We were supposed to be terraforming if we hadn’t crashed! The safety protocols — at least back then — were that you weren’t allowed to even store 283 and 342 in the same room, let alone three millimetres apart!”

“Anna is correct,” Data said. “Though it is an unlikely scenario, there is some risk, depending primarily on the quality of construction of the plates.”

Anna calmed down slightly at finally being agreed with. She said, “And of course any gamma radiation would set all of them off anyway, but I guess if there was gamma radiation in here we’d already have bigger problems.”

“Well obviously we don’t,” Geordi said. “Nobody’s throwing around radio waves in here randomly either.”

“Doesn’t have to be in here, though,” Anna said. “You can detonate 584 with the right AM frequency from really far away as long as there’s no interference to the signal.” Then she conceded, “But I suppose there’s probably tons of interference from our own ship, so probably nobody could detonate it from another ship unless they were close enough to already have everyone freaking out.”

“Yeah, generally speaking the bridge crew freak out about ships within defensive range bombarding us with any kind of wave, even otherwise harmless ones,” Aisling said.

“And of course FM bands would be blocked by the hull,” Anna continued. “But if someone could get the right AM frequency close enough and aimed at the panels...” She mimed an explosive burst with her hands.

“Geordi?” Aisling said. “I’m sorry, but that’s enough for me to initiate a security protocol.”

Geordi nodded grimly. “Yeah, okay, I get it.”

“It is better to be safe than sorry,” Data said. “That is the correct aphorism, is it not?”

“It is, Data,” Geordi said. “Right, Aisling, go for it.”

Aisling tapped her badge and said, “Lieutenant Navarro to bridge. We have a Class 16-B explosive danger in the joined Deck Thirty-Seven cargo bays. I am initiating local evacuation.”

“*Understood, Lieutenant,*” came Riker’s voice in reply. “*We are dispatching an assessment team. Please standby within protocol distance to brief them.*”

“Yes sir,” she replied. “LaForge and Data are on their way to brief the bridge crew.” She tapped off the badge and pointed officiously at everyone in turn as she issued firm orders. “Mack, Anna, nearest exit now and return to main engineering to await further instructions. Senior officers directed to the bridge.”

“On our way,” Geordi said as he and Data marched out.

“Computer, confirm no other lifeforms present in the cargo area,” Aisling said as she backed her way towards the door behind her.

“*Confirmed,*” the computer replied. “*Class 16-B protocol will be initiated in ten seconds.*”

Aisling hit the panel in the corridor to close all the cargo bay doors as the computer began its countdown. She turned to find Anna standing there, twisting her fingers with worry. “I don’t mean to sound curt, Anna, but you really do have to go,” she said.

“I’m leaving, but can’t I go to my quarters?”

“No, sorry, you need to make statements. You and Mack can stay together. I’ll make sure a friendly woman comes up, I promise. That whole room is about to fill with a grid of level ten containment fields, isolating each stack, and then a bomb squad will go through it all. Security needs to record which stacks you witnessed. Go on, it’ll be okay.”

Anna nodded nervously, but Mack tapped her shoulder from behind and nodded towards the turbolift, so they left together.



Stardate 47255.7 (Saturday 04/04/2370 07:45) — Bridge — Ready Room

“When you say ‘unlikely’, Data, how unlikely do you mean?” Picard asked in a dark tone from behind his desk.

Standing before it along with La Forge and Riker, Data said, “Extremely unlikely. Even if a cloaked ship were to match our

speed and send the required radio transmission — without detection — the explosives are still separated by the duranium layer between them. There is no evidence as of yet of any breakdown of that layer. It is an inefficient method of creating an explosion on board, sir.”

“Yeah, it’s way, way more likely that we’ve been duped into trafficking the stuff, sir,” La Forge added.

“Then why would you willingly bring it aboard?” Riker asked.

“It was unintentional, sir,” Data replied. “Both substances are legal and explosives are expected in the ablative armour format. It was only when Specialist White happened to notice the particular amounts and ratio that we realised how unusual the format and amounts were.”

“Plus you told us to be on the lookout for mining weirdness, and this falls into that category,” La Forge said.

Riker frowned deeply. “Why does White’s name keep coming up all the time lately?”

Picard thought to himself, *A damned good question.*

Data’s brow furrowed and his head tilted slightly. “Sir?”

“It just seems like she’s got her fingers in everything since she came on board,” Riker said. “The interphasic weirdness with the drive replacement, the Tarkanian threat, and now this.”

Data’s brow went back up and he righted his head. “The interphasic creatures had nothing to do with Anna’s contributions to the drive upgrade. She had no connection to the Tarkanians, and was essential in their defeat. She has no reason to be aware of armour shipments, either now or in the past. It is entirely possible we have been ‘duped’ in this manner before. She simply employed her unusual level of knowledge pertaining to older terraforming technology to facilitate today’s recognition of the substances. She has likewise employed that information to our benefit in the past, regarding hydroprocessors. There is no logical evidence linking her knowledge to the other events in any meaningful way.”

Riker shook his head. “Am I the only one who thinks that it seems a little too convenient that she’s involved with so much when she was only brought aboard for one purpose?”

Data’s brow furrowed again, but before he could reply Picard lifted a hand and said, “Number One, I understand where you’re coming from, but I’m certain Ms. White’s random bursts of expertise aren’t any sort of conspiratorial series of events. Given what T’Char told me and as Mr. La Forge points out, it’s much more likely that these explosives and any past shipments of them — by us or other vessels — point to someone latching onto existing trade to hide bigger things.”

“Right,” Riker said. “And how do we know she’s not involved with those bigger things?”

“To be honest, sir, Anna’s really bad at hiding much of anything,” La Forge said. “Everyone around her can tell she’s got demons in her past, but the fact that they haunt her is constantly apparent. I don’t think she could conspire her way out of a paper bag.”

Data tilted his head again. “How would a paper bag —”

“Data, it’s just an expression,” La Forge quickly clarified.

“Ah.”

“Indeed,” Picard said, eager to shift the topic for multiple reasons. “I doubt White has anything to do with it directly. I don’t think we were meant to notice at all, and I agree with Data’s assessment that the point is not to detonate anything, but to get the items delivered.”

Riker said, “You think this is the intrigue amidst the mundane you’ve been waiting for.”

“Precisely,” Picard said with a nod. “However, if we are seen to notice that something is amiss...”

“We might become a target,” Riker said.

“Exactly, Number One.”

“Sir, anyone going to this length to hide the shipments is likely attempting to remain hidden,” Data said. “Even if it becomes known that we have discovered the explosives, detonating the

Federation flagship would not be a logical step for anyone engaged in clandestine activities.”

Picard nodded. “Hm, yes, very true, Data.”

“Would it not make more sense for the perpetrators to suddenly cut ties with this branch of their operation upon realising our discovery?” Data suggested. “I believe it is common for both organised crime syndicates and espionage rings to abandon those who become a liability rather than risk further attention.”

“Yeah,” Riker said, crossing his arms and nodding. “If you get caught, you’re expected to take the fall alone or else the people above you go after your friends or family.”

“So we need to see who falls, but in a controlled fashion,” Picard said. “Who knows about this thus far?”

“Uh, us, Aisling, Anna, and Mack, and then whoever’s doing the bomb sweep with Navarro down there,” La Forge said. “And security will be getting Anna and Mack’s statements about now.”

Picard stood and tugged his shirt down. “Right. Let’s keep it at that for the time being. Number One, go personally to ensure all security teams involved understand that this discovery and any further results they find are classified for the time being. Geordi, I want you to go down to engineering and handle Mack and Anna. Gently. Mack’s not one for loose lips, and I doubt Anna wants any part of this sort of thing.”

Riker shot Picard a quizzical look, but the latter ignored it entirely.

“No problem, sir,” La Forge replied. “I’m pretty sure they’re both itching to go quietly back to quarters until it all blows over.”

Picard nodded. “I’ll contact T’Char so he has time to get eyes and ears in place on any other potential parts of the chain. Once he’s ready, we can handle the items as if we’ve independently discovered a shipping violation while allowing T’Char to quietly glean whatever he can about wider plots. Dismissed.”



T'Char listened intently as Picard explained the situation, and then simply said, *"Fascinating."*

"Does any of this fit in with whatever you've been investigating?"

T'Char made no direct reply, but instead asked, *"What would you do if these explosives had been discovered and I hadn't told you about my investigation?"*

Picard thought for a moment, and then replied, "Under any other circumstances if we discovered unexpected explosive substances of this magnitude aboard, we'd perform examinations with abundant safety protocols in place to gather whatever evidence possible, and then put the dangerous items out into space at a safe distance. Then we'd contact those who had given them to us for an explanation. If they satisfied me that it was an error and I believed there to be no threat, I would work with them to decide what to do with the items."

*"And if they failed to respond or to satisfy you with a legitimate explanation?"*

"I'd move the ship to a safe distance and detonate the lot of it. Then I'd send in my report to Starfleet HQ with all of the collected evidence and let them deal with it further."

T'Char nodded sagely. *"Then give me four hours to put some listening posts in place while you collect your evidence and proceed as you just described. Jean-Luc, I do not expect them to satisfy you."*

"Nor do I. We anticipated that if we followed our procedure, it'd likely create chatter for you to follow."

*"Indeed. Thank you, my friend. I'll get back to you with whatever information I can share later. Though it may not be much, or soon."*

"Understood."

*“And Jean-Luc?”*

*“Yes?”*

*“Call me illogical, but the fates of you and your crew do matter more to me than chasing down this intrigue. If your ship is in danger before the four hours are up, eject and detonate the materials safely.”*

Picard smiled. “I have never held that it is illogical to preserve lives.”

*“No, you have not. It is one of your most admirable qualities.”*

“Thank you.”

T’Char nodded and terminated the call.



Stardate 47256.1 (Saturday 04/04/2370 11:45) — Bridge

Riker returned to the bridge with a PADD which he handed to Picard. “Here’s the assessment,” he said. “It matches what was already reported.”

“Thank you, Number One.”

“Navarro’s on top of it. Worf’s making sure the Cairn aren’t anywhere near any of it and then he’ll take over from Navarro. Nothing gets announced until you say so. With forcefields in place, there’s no need to evacuate decks yet.”

“Good.”

“How long are we giving T’Char?”

“About fifteen more minutes,” Picard said. “Then we’ll officially ‘discover’ the items. We’ll full stop and put them outside.”

“I hope that won’t delay us in getting the Cairn to Deep Space Four in time for the Federation Council meeting,” Riker said, then he added quietly, “Our favourite ambassador seems unduly stressed about it.”

“We’ll make up the time,” Picard replied.

“Tell that to her,” Riker said. “She’s really wound up. More than usual.”

Picard nodded grimly. “I’ve noticed. But she needs to be patient and trust us to do our best for everyone involved.”

“She just bit my head off in Ten Forward,” Riker whispered. “Completely flipped out because I was talking with Deanna. She told me to stay away from her daughter and said it’s my fault Deanna’s not married by now.”

Picard gave him a surprised look. As bombastic as Lwaxana could be, such behaviour was unusual even for her.

They sat in silence after that until the four hours had passed. Then Picard stood, adjusted his uniform, and ordered, “Full stop.”

“Aye sir,” said the ensign at the helm.

“Go to Yellow Alert.”

“Yellow Alert initiated,” Data said from the ops station.

“Bridge to all security personnel,” Picard announced. “Begin hazardous material procedures and adhere to standard Yellow Alert protocols.”

Moments later, Worf came onto the bridge. “The items have been put out. Teams are in place.”

“Very good,” Picard said. “Helm, move us at quarter impulse to standard safe detonation distance.”

“Aye sir,” the ensign replied.

“Mr. Worf, contact Starbase 219.”

“Aye sir,” Worf replied. A moment later he said, “They are responding.”

“On screen.”

“*Yes Captain?*” Commander Snrag — a relatively young Tellarite — greeted politely.

“I regret to inform you that someone aboard your station has attempted to smuggle unregistered explosives aboard the Enterprise.”

Snrag was immediately horrified. “*What? That can’t be! We have procedures!*”

“As do we. It seems someone took advantage of our procedures. We are forwarding you the details now,” Picard said, turning back to nod at Riker, who in turn tapped buttons on his chair console.

Snrag looked at his own console, blinked rapidly as he read the information coming through, and then said, “*We will immediately investigate and get back to you.*”

“Understood, Commander. Make it so. Picard out.”

Picard turned to go back to his chair, but before he got there Data said, “Captain, I have an emergency communication from the arboretum.”

“The arboretum?” Picard asked.

Data turned in his chair to face Picard. “Yes sir. Ambassador Troi has fallen unconscious and is being taken to sickbay.”

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Stardate 47256.9 (Saturday 04/04/2370 18:49) — Bridge

Riker sat up straighter as Picard returned to the bridge. “How is she?”

“Doctor Crusher is not yet certain about Ambassador Troi’s status,” Picard said rather formally. “Let’s go with available senior staff to the observation lounge and get an update from 219.”

Worf said, “Initiating contact and putting it through to the observation lounge.” Then he, La Forge, Data, Riker, and Picard all headed up the starboard ramp that lead to the lounge.

When they got Snrag on the line he was clearly upset by the entire situation. “*Captain, I must tell you in full shame that we seem to have been duped by most traitorous fiends!*”

“Indeed, Commander. What have you been able to learn?”

“*We have attempted to contact everyone involved with the affected shipment, but the only individual who responded was freighter captain Kraff Tzuri. He’s completely distraught. Apparently he thought he was engaged in a charitable act, and Captain Picard, I must say, I do believe him. He’s being quite compliant and has handed over all of his records.*”

“That’s something, at least,” Picard replied.

“*We had him attempt to contact his buyer from Phelan who was to take the plates at Deep Space Four, but the buyer isn’t responding to his hails. Deep Space Four had the buyer listed for a cargo bay so they attempted to contact him as well, feigning an issue with the bay, but the buyer appears to have gone dark. I am sorry.*”

Picard nodded. “It is unfortunately common for these things to go that way once a spotlight is shone upon them.”

“*I’m co-ordinating with Federation security teams to investigate the colony at Arcnir, where the plates originated. Tzuri*

*acquired them directly from the colony and thought they came from their own ships, but he said he can't be sure of the source. We're holding Tzuri for the moment for his own safety and to see if doing so prompts anyone else involved to pop up, but again, we don't think he's the guilty party."*

"Understood, Commander. Thank you. Please keep us informed if you learn more."

*"I will, Captain."*

With the call terminated, Picard turned his chair back around to the others seated around the table.

"I agree with him about Tzuri," La Forge said. "I've known him for years. He's a softie through and through. I'm not shocked someone turned him into their fall guy, to be honest."

"Perhaps you should put that into an official affidavit," Picard suggested.

"Yeah, absolutely," La Forge agreed.

"*Captain, incoming transmission from Admiral Wong,*" came a call from the bridge.

"Put her through to here," Picard said, and then stood to attention. "Hello Admiral. I was expecting your call."

"*Hm, yes,*" Wong said coldly. "*We are in receipt of your report. You are to immediately detonate all suspect materials and then return to your assignment to deliver the Cairn safely to the meeting on Deep Space Four.*"

"Understood."

"*Do you have an update on Ambassador Troi's condition?*"

"Not yet. She is in Doctor Crusher's care."

"*Hm. I will check in with her. Wong out.*"

Picard's brows went up and he let out a long, slow breath as he turned around and sat back down. He looked to Worf pointedly.

Worf stood, nodded, and then quickly left to carry out the secure detonation.

"I guess that wraps it up for our part in this intrigue, huh?" Riker asked.

"It would seem so, Number One."

“I have written a proposal for updated security scans pertaining to potential explosives for future incoming goods,” Data said.

“Good, thank you,” Picard said. He sighed and then added, “I do hope T’Char’s listening posts yield something of use to him, though I don’t expect to hear from him for awhile.”

“It occurs to me that real-life mysteries are not as satisfying as fictional ones, sir,” Data said.

“No, Data. I suspect it’ll be quite some time — if ever — before we find out what this nonsense was all about.”



Stardate 47258.1 (Sunday 05/04/2370 04:45) — Deck Thirty-One  
— Room 5435, Anna’s Lab

The ship’s population was uncharacteristically tense and gloomy on what was usually a festive evening before First Contact Day. Rumours of explosive materials and that Ambassador Troi might be dying in sickbay sent would-be revellers to bed early instead.

Anna found that she couldn’t sleep. She knew the explosives had been dealt with and she didn’t particularly care about some Betazoid, as long as the mind-reader stayed away from her. But she remained unsettled by the security interview — even though everyone involved had been reasonably pleasant about it — and the other events of the week that felt like they were piling upon her.

She went to her lab to see if she could find an interesting distraction, but ended up mostly pottering around aimlessly until there was an unexpected chime at the door in the wee hours when she assumed everyone she knew would be asleep or — in Data’s case — on bridge duty.

Tentatively, she put on her leg, went to the door, and pushed the button to open it, shocked to see a grinning little Aoife there in her fuzzy, pink, footed pajamas.

“Happy First Contact Day!” the child exclaimed as she pushed past Anna into the lab.

“Uh...you should not be here?” Anna said, intending it to be a declaration though it came out as a question.

Aoife scoffed, crossed her arms defiantly, and rolled her eyes. “How am I supposed to sleep when everything is so exciting!?”

“Right...okay...but...surely your parents didn’t let you go wandering around in the middle of the night? I think it’s normal for parents to keep kids home all night? Right?”

“Yeah, but I bye-bye passed the lock to come visit you!” She put on an exaggerated pout. “Aren’t you glad to see me?”

Anna sat in one of the chairs by the table so she could match height to Aoife. “I’m glad to see you, but not like this. Aoife, when they find you missing they’re going to panic. I don’t want them panicking at me.”

“They’re asleep. It’s fine.”

“No, it really isn’t. I need to take you back.”

Aoife narrowed her eyes and put her fists on her hips. “If you do that, Daddy will get all growly like he did last time.”

Anna sighed. “That’s not fair, Aoife. You’re manipulating me.”

“I’m whatting you? I just want to play.” She looked around the room. “You have lots of interesting things in here!”

Anna stood back up quickly to move herself between the child and the piles of engineering equipment. “I have lots of dangerous things in here!”

Aoife grinned. “That makes them more exciting!”

“You can’t stay here!”

“Not even for a bit?” She pouted again, but this time more genuinely. “I promise I won’t touch anything. Mom and Daddy wake up at five-thirty. That’s hours from now!”

Anna glanced at the console. “No, it’s just over half an hour from now.”

“So let me stay for half an hour, pleeeeeease?” the child begged.

Anna sighed. “Fine. Half an hour. Then I’m taking you back in time for them to be up.”

“Yay!” Aoife squealed, jumping up and down with her arms in the air.

Anna went to the console. “But first I’m sending them a note that you’re here so if they wake up early, they know you’re safe.” She tapped out a quick message to Aisling and sent it, then turned back to Aoife with a scolding look.

The ridiculously exaggerated pout returned as Aoife shuffled her feet towards Anna. Then she put on an overly innocent expression and asked, “Will you tell me more about your spaceship? Not the lonely parts, the amazing parts!”

Anna sat down again, choosing her words very carefully. “There were some amazing parts. When you live in a place for a long time — even a scary, lonely place — you learn to make it work for you as much as you can. I was a child so I did childish stuff on it.”

“Like what?” Aoife asked eagerly.

“Like...the kinds of things any kid would do on an upended ship. I had to learn to walk on walls because the floor became the walls.”

“Whoa! So did you step on cupboards and stuff?”

“Sometimes, but cupboard doors didn’t always hold weight well so I had to learn to walk around things that could break. Here, I’ll show you,” she said, getting down onto the floor and pointing her feet towards the lower cabinets on the aft side of the room. “Lie down with me here and put your feet on these doors like I’m doing.”

Aoife eagerly plopped down beside Anna and then shuffled down so her feet touched the cabinets, giggling the whole time.

Anna tapped the doors with her left foot. “See how they kind of rattle?”

Aoife kicked at the doors boisterously. “Yeah!”

“These ones are pretty strong because this is an engineering lab, so probably they’d hold your weight, but also maybe not. The kinds that are in quarters are flimsier. They’re not made to hold weight. But if you close your eyes, you can kind of imagine that the floor we’re lying on is actually the wall, and we’re standing on the cabinets.”

Aoife dutifully closed her eyes, wiggled her feet a little, and then said, “Yeah. It’s weird, though.”

“It is. Now open your eyes and imagine that you could walk along that door and that the counter is a step down, so you could step onto that wall.”

Aoife opened her eyes and peered towards the aft wall. “Whoa. It’s making me a bit dizzy to think about it.”

“If you were actually on an upended ship, you’d get used to it pretty quick, but then have to learn how to get around. The corridors become dangerous shafts you could fall down.”

“Oh!” Aoife said, deliciously horrified. “Did you fall down them?”

“No, not much. I was careful and then I used ropes and —”

The door chimed again.

“Who is it?” Aoife called out cheerily.

“Aoife Navarro you get out here this instant!” came the bellowing voice of Kajus.

Anna hurriedly sat up enough to reach the door button and let him in.

He barged in like a storm, nearly stepping on Anna and regarding her with fire in his eyes. “You!” he growled.

“Daddy, don’t be mad at Anna!” Aoife protested, springing up from the floor.

But Kajus wasn’t listening. He scooped Aoife up and then pointed accusingly at Anna in one fluid motion. “I told you to stay away from my daughter!”

Anna scrambled to back away from his fury, desperately trying to explain that she didn’t initiate this contact. “But I...she was...”

“I won’t have her around the likes of you! Look at this place!” he shouted, pointing at the equipment. “This is no place for a child! What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I didn’t...I wasn’t trying to...”

But still he continued to speak over her. “You are a dangerous, terrible, evil woman who has no business spreading your lack of common sense to anybody, let alone my child!”

“Daddy, stop it!” Aoife growled back at him, trying in vain to wriggle out from his grasp.

“Go back to whatever hellhole you climbed out of and don’t come near my family again or I’ll have you thrown in the brig!” Kajus barked, and then turned and left with Anna still on the floor.

She could barely breathe, and as she tried it prompted ragged sobs of terror and shame. Shaking all over, Anna crawled to her hiding spot in the corner cabinet under the LCARS panel and crammed herself inside as tightly as she could. She cast aside her artificial leg so she could better fit with the door nearly closed, and then curled up and cried.

Squeezing her eyes shut and clamping her hands over her ears, she tried to shut out The Worst Words — what Picard had said to her mother about not wanting either of them — but failed. Caught in a spiral of deep trauma, Anna remained in the cabinet for a long time, feeling very much like the garbage that so many men saw her as.



Stardate 47258.5 (Sunday 05/04/2370 08:17) — Deck Thirty-One  
— Room 5435, Anna’s Lab

Hours passed.

Anna’s crying also passed, shifting into silence other than the sound of her breath echoing in the narrow space amidst the backdrop of the ship’s normal hum. Her anguish was gradually

replaced with a protective shell of numbness around her entire being. When her door chimed at one point, she only heard it in a distant sense, unaware that the sound was meant to attract her attention, much less comprehending what to do or say about it.

Time moved in its habitual linear fashion; people went about their day all around her on the ship, and on other ships, and on planets and space stations, millions of people all throughout the galaxy existing outside of Anna's defensive little bubble of psychological shielding.

Inside of her shell, she was safe. There was no Jean-Luc Picard. There was no William Dager. There was no Kajus Navarro. There was no Dean Covett. There most certainly was no Robert Loxos. There were no men. Men were gone, and in their absence Anna could carefully piece back together her defences, her sense of self, her deeply entrenched survival instinct.

Eventually her eyes opened and she stared into the darkness of the inner cabinet wall.

In time, the thought occurred to her, *I am tired of this.*

Followed shortly by, *I will no longer abide this.*

In that moment her anguish flipped to anger, like a spark of flame feeding upon itself, growing in power and malevolence.

Anna's whole body shook once more, but no longer in terror. She had become terror, the fury of both girl and woman beaten down by men throughout her life. Her lip curled back, her teeth bared, and she snarled a low growl of pent-up rage.

She pushed the small door open and unfolded herself outward and upward, fists clenched in a monstrous posture.

"Computer," she ordered, "where does Kajus Navarro work?"

*"Lieutenant Kajus Navarro is an exobiologist aboard the Enterprise, with a primary workstation in the port biophysics lab on Deck Fourteen."*

"Show me an optimal Jefferies tube route to that room," she said as she put on her leg.



Stardate 47258.5 (Sunday 05/04/2370 08:35) — Deck Fourteen —  
Biophysics Lab, Room 14-2704

Lieutenants Donovan and Mount sat together at a console, comparing lists of test data from experiments they were running on samples collected from recent away missions. Across the room, Kajus walked slowly past a shielded shelf of tiny pots with seedlings, making notes in a PADD. Other than the general ship's hum and occasional drips from the growing area's hydration system, it was very quiet.

Working in the sort of lab where lots of people come and go, none of them even thought to look up when the door opened, but all three were startled when a forceful voice with a dark edge declared, "Lieutenant Navarro, I wish to speak with you."

When Kajus realised who it was, he stammered, "Uh...but...right now isn't —"

"Oh?" Anna asked with wide, accusatory eyes. "Is it interruptive to come to your place of work?"

"Well...yes...and —"

"You came to my place of work and had some very choice words for me," she said with a fearsome air of authority.

Kajus gulped and took an involuntary step back.

Anna took two steps towards him, her hands rising slowly to her sides, palms facing him, as if she was about to hurl balls of fire. "What you said to me this morning was deeply unfair and I should not have to feel miserable because of it."

Kajus coughed, crossed his arms, and attempted to scold her in return. "Look —"

"No, you look," she said with a hint of a growl. "You listen. I took care of her. I sent a message that she was safe, and I kept her safe."

"Yeah, I get that," Kajus snapped back. "But she's going to keep coming to you like that because you make it fun."

Anna's lip curled for a moment, but then the dark regality returned. "What am I supposed to do? Be as unkind to her as you were to me today?"

"You...it's just...you need to stop encouraging her!"

"How?" Anna asked, throwing her arms wide. "She wants to know things and to see things and to touch things because she's a curious child!"

"And you're giving her too many answers!" Kajus retorted.

"So what would you have me do? Speak to her like adults spoke to me when I was a curious child? I could never be that cruel, that heartless, cutting her heart to ribbons because she's inconveniently nearby."

Kajus tried to refute her again, but all of a sudden she was quick on her toes towards him, snarling out line after line of horrible words in different voices, mimicking the adult voices from her memory. "What are you doing in here? Why are you always underfoot? What could you possibly want now?!"

He backed away but on she came, increasing in volume with each quotation. "Didn't I tell you to stay out of here? Get away from that! Don't touch that! That isn't for you! None of this is for you, you little brat! Go away! Fuck off! I never should have let you aboard in the first place! Stop asking so many questions! If I see you in here one more time I'm going to beam you into space, you little shit, and that'll finally shut you up, won't it?!"

Her last syllables rang around the room, leaving her panting with tears streaming down her face, standing inches away from Kajus who hid behind his arms, trembling.

Then Anna faltered, clutched her hands over her heart, and staggered back away from him. She shook her head and whispered, "I could never do that to her. Never ever. I couldn't be so cruel. I couldn't look at her soft eyes full of wonder and joy and crush it out."

She looked at Kajus again, who was lowering his hands slightly. "I couldn't rip her open for your convenience. I was trying to help."

She took two more steps back as she drew in a deep breath and once more flung her arms out to the sides. Then she belted out with full force, making the very panels of the room rattle before her as if she'd summoned Elphaba directly into the room, *"No good deed goes unpunished! All helpful urges should be circumvented! No good deed goes unpunished! Sure, I meant well, well, look at what well-meant did!"*

Anna stepped towards Kajus again, this time pointing forth her own accusatory finger as she shout-sang words that were not actually a song so much as pure fury erupting from her in musical form. *"It's not my job to stay away from her when I never approached her in the first place! It's not my job to bash in her dreams if she wanders my way! Why don't you do your damned job and pay enough attention to her in the first place?! So she doesn't keep escaping and looking for attention from the likes of me!"*

On the last note she threw her arms out, hands curled into claws, eyes full of fire, holding the note so long and loud that it was nearly painful to be audience to it.

As her arms descended and she stopped singing, she spoke every word weighted like an oath. "I will not discourage her. I will not treat her as I was treated. So if you think I'm such a terrible influence, then you step up and give her something more interesting than me to come to."

With that, she turned on her left heel and strode mightily out of the room.

The relative silence returned, though now everyone's ears were ringing, their chests feeling as if they'd been in the front row of an epic concert.

Kajus stood there for a moment, and then slowly walked out.

The other two officers continued to stare at the space where Anna and Kajus had been, the stage empty yet somehow retaining the remnants of an awesome power.

Eventually Donovan said, "Um. What was that?"

Mount shrugged. "Some engineering type singing angry stuff at Navarro?"

Donovan asked, “Who is she?”

Mount shook his head. “No idea. He probably deserved it, though.”

They turned their chairs towards each other, nodded at each other, then turned further back to their consoles and resumed their work.



Stardate 47258.9 (Sunday 05/04/2370 11:46) — Deck Thirty-One  
— Room 5435, Anna’s Lab

Utterly depleted, Anna had slunk back to the cupboard in her lab, though this time she didn’t cram herself as tightly into it. It was more of a refuge, and she drifted in and out of a light doze as she awaited the inevitable fallout from her outrage.

Thus she was unsurprised when her door chimed. She tried to brace for impact but lacked the energy, so instead she simply said, “Come in.”

Geordi entered and looked around the room for her briefly before discovering her peering from the cabinet. He nodded understandingly and came to sit on the floor beside her, his back against the starboard wall. “You okay?” he asked.

“No,” she replied flatly.

“Yeah,” he agreed, nodding slowly.

“Are you here to make me leave the ship?”

“What?! Hell no! Wait...you don’t want to leave over this, do you?”

“No, but I caused trouble.”

Geordi sighed loudly. “Anna, first of all — from what I heard — you weren’t the start of any of it. Secondly, even if you were, we don’t make a habit here of getting rid of people just because of an argument. Thirdly, this isn’t even the biggest drama on board right now.”

“It isn’t?”

“No. Last night Ambassador Troi almost died, but then somehow overnight recovered and remembered she had another kid who did die, and all of that while she’s supposed to be helping a new bunch of people get introduced to the Federation. And you probably aren’t even aware of how much work and preparation and ridiculous levels of diplomacy go into that kind of introduction. There’s been a massive melodrama going on upstairs for the last day or so that has nothing to do with you or the Navarro family. Trust me, everyone’s focused on that, not you folks.”

“Oh.”

“Although...I guess I can understand why you might think you’d be thrown away like that, given how you were treated as a kid. Kajus told Aisling the things you said, and Aisling told me. Did someone really threaten to space you when you were a little kid?”

“Yeah,” Anna said, squirming into a defensive posture.

Geordi let out a low whistle between his teeth.

“I shouldn’t have repeated that stuff to Kajus,” Anna said. “It was awful. It just...all came up. Like...vomiting. I couldn’t help it.”

“They shouldn’t have said horrible things to you, Anna. Starfleet has some jerks like any other organisation, but none of us would space an innocent civilian, especially not a little kid.”

Anna tightened herself back into the cabinet’s corner. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Fair enough. I just want you to know that even if they were assholes who said it, it was never going to happen. And anyway, you’re safe here now. Nobody’s going to threaten you like that, and nobody’s going to make you leave either.”

Anna shrugged, unconvinced, but Geordi couldn’t see it from the other side of the partially-closed cupboard door.

“The Navarros want to get together with you and talk it all out. Kajus got overprotective and Aisling is desperate to apologise about that. Nobody’s blaming you for anything, at least not anymore. I don’t think they even blame Aoife. She’s just a little kid

doing what little kids do, and you're just a nice person who did your best with a kid who knows how to push buttons on people and, frankly, too many damned doors on this ship."

He leaned forward so he could see Anna better around the cupboard door. "Seriously, Anna, I know this feels all big and scary but it isn't. Kajus is all bark and no bite." He chuckled. "I think maybe you scared him back pretty good. You should go talk to them and work it out. Tempers flared but if you discuss it like rational adults, it'll all be okay. You'll all end up friends in the end, I'm sure of it."

"I wouldn't know what to say to them," Anna grumbled.

"So hear them out. Give them a chance to make it better from their end. Work out what should be done the next time Aoife pulls something, because that kid..." He shook his head and sighed again. "My dad always says that it's the smart ones that make it hard. If Aoife likes you, work with the Navarros to be the kind of adult she'll at least half-listen to. These things have a way of working out if people communicate."

"Maybe," Anna muttered.

"It will. Aisling will make sure of it. Aoife gets her determination from somewhere, you know? They've invited you to come by their quarter any time later today, after shift change so Aoife's home with them, but before her bedtime at 20:30. Aisling insisted multiple times that I make sure you understand that this is a friendly invitation with however many double fudgers you want, not a summons. She really wants to fix this, Anna, I promise."

"Okay, I'll try," Anna said.

"Good," he replied. "If you need a buddy to go with you, you can call on me whenever you decide to go."

"It's okay. I can do it myself."

"Okay, but I'll be available if you change your mind. You've got friends here, Anna. You're not alone anymore. Drama happens but it's okay. Everything's going to be okay."



Stardate 47259.4 (Sunday 05/04/2370 16:00) — Deck Twenty-Three — Room 5223, Navarro Quarters

When the door chimed, Aoife stood on the couch bouncing and shouting, “She’s here! She’s here!”

“Aoife, cool it down ten notches,” Aisling said as she crossed the room. “It could be someone else.”

Aoife finished a bounce by plopping down on her backside, arms crossed defiantly, and complained, “Nobody else ever visits us. We’re boring. I wish people visited all the time!”

Kajus quietly said, “Punkin, please.”

Aoife rolled her eyes and relaxed for a brief moment, but then sprang across the room as Aisling opened the door.

There stood Anna, fingers twisting, shoulders defensively hunched, eyes darting around in danger-scanning mode.

“Hey,” Aisling said gently. “We’re glad you’re here. It’s —”

“Anna!” Aoife shrieked, pushing past her mother. “I was so afraid they’d never let me see you again!”

Aisling sighed tiredly and said to Anna, “We never said anything of the kind. She’s being very dramatic. Please come in.”

Anna took a half-step into the door but then looked at Kajus warily.

Aisling said. “It’s fine. He’s fine. We’re all fine. He’s not going to bite, I promise.”

“Daddy doesn’t bite, he just gets prickly,” Aoife said.

Both parents issued an admonishment of, “Aoife,” in unison, but the child appeared not to care.

With another sigh Aisling said, “Please come have a seat. I absolutely swear you’re safe here.”

Aoife crossed her arms again and muttered, “I don’t understand why grownups get to say true things but I can’t. It’s not fair.”

Aisling shot her daughter a look of warning. “Time and place, Aoife. Time and place. Go sit down.”

“I want to sit with Anna!”

“Maybe in a bit. I put your desk chair there for now so nobody’s crowding Anna or making her nervous.”

Aoife sighed in exact imitation of her mother, but went nonetheless to sit in the little pink and purple chair across from Kajus, who was in the armchair with the coffee table and couch in between.

Anna bit her lip and then said softly, “I don’t know what to do or say or anything about this sort of thing.”

“That’s okay,” Aisling said. “You’re not in trouble, Anna.”

Eyeing Kajus carefully as if he was a predator who might leap at her any moment, Anna moved to sit on the couch, closer to Aoife’s side than Kajus.

Kajus remained still, his arms crossed, looking at the floor.

Aisling pulled over one of the dining chairs from the nearby eating area and sat on it, opposite Anna. “This has all been a horrible misunderstanding. I don’t want any of our relationships tainted by this, so I think it’s important that we talk it out and make some boundaries clear.” She turned to Aoife — who was already fidgeting in the little chair — and said, “By ‘boundaries’, I mean you.”

Aoife glared at her and crossed her arms yet again.

But Aisling mirrored the glare back. “Aoife, you know you’re not supposed to sneak out of quarters. You knew you shouldn’t have done that. Bad enough that you did that and broke that rule, bad enough that you scared us, but to drag Anna into it was really unfair. You owe her an apology.”

Anna cringed.

Aoife let her arms flop dramatically to her sides, sighed in the deepest, aggrieved-three-year-old way imaginable, but then dragged her oh-so-burdened tiny self out of the chair to stand in front of Anna and say, “I’m sorry.” Then she stood a little straighter and repeated more sincerely, “I’m sorry, Anna.”

Anna mustered an awkward smile and said, “I...I’m sorry too.”

“It’s okay,” Aisling said to her. “You did what you thought was best. You kept Aoife safe and you even contacted us. We never made it clear to you what we wanted you to do, so how could you possibly know otherwise?”

Anna looked away, but Aoife slid up onto the couch beside her, meeting her gaze with huge eyes full of regret and concern.

“Anna, we’re not angry at you,” Aisling said firmly, and then nudged Kajus’s foot with her own. “Anymore. Right?”

Kajus squirmed a little, but then sat up straighter and carefully recited, “I’m sorry I yelled at you like that. I was panicked. It wasn’t fair to take it out on you. I didn’t love being chewed out in front of colleagues but it was a fair enough reaction given that I chewed you out first. I understand now that some of these things are hard for you, same as they are for me. I’m working to control my temper.”

“Um...me too,” Anna said, still watching him as if she expected him to explode.

Aoife smiled and brightly announced, “I promise next time I sneak out, I’ll leave a note!”

“Aoife!” Aisling snapped.

Aoife once again appeared dramatically wronged as her little arms flew out. “What?! You want me to lie and say I never will again?! For the whole rest of my life?! Even when I’m...fourteen?!”

Kajus gently said, “Aoife, fourteen is a long time away. We need you to promise to stop doing this now.”

Anna added, “It would really help me be able to play with you again — assuming your parents say I can — if I know you’re not sneaking out.”

Aoife rolled her eyes and flopped back on the arm of the couch with her hands over her head. “Fine. I promise not to sneak out again.”

Kajus said, “Thank you.”

“Until I’m at least twelve,” the child added with a sinister little giggle.

Aisling put her face in her hands, elbows on her knees, and muttered something incoherent.

Aoife sat back up and stage-whispered to Anna, “Mom’s swearing now. She thinks I can’t tell.”

“Aoife Milena Navarro!” Aisling snapped, louder than before.

Aoife — wise enough even at this age to know when the middle name comes out, a parent means business — said, “Oops. Heh.”

But Anna diffused it by replying to Aoife directly. “Aoife, you’re really lucky to have parents who love you and try to keep you safe. You need to be kind to them. I can’t play with you again if I think you might be manipulating me about rules I don’t know about.”

Aoife pleaded, “I wasn’t manillating you! All the stuff I said was true!”

“There’s true stuff and then there’s saying true stuff in a way to get me to do things.”

Aoife scrunched up her face in absolute bafflement. “Of course I want you to do things. Doesn’t everyone want to get everyone else to do things?”

Aisling groaned, and then firmly said, “Aoife, just because you want someone to do something doesn’t mean you can use words — even true words — to trick them into it. That’s what ‘manipulating’ means, and it’s not friendly.”

Aoife shot back, “But you use bits of true things to get me to do stuff all the time! Like how you say stuff isn’t safe but it really mostly is! You try to make me stay inside or not go to engineering or all the other fun places on the ship but other people go there all the time and they’re safe! You manillate me!”

Aisling clenched her teeth and tried to talk a calming breath.

Once again, Anna diffused the tension between them. “Aoife,” she said calmly, “that’s different. Like I told you when I first met you, places like engineering aren’t supposed to be for kids because the people in there have learned how to stay safe. You feel safe because all of the good grownups around you keeping you safe.”

Aoife protested, “You went into your ship’s engineering when you were a kid!”

“Yeah, because I had to, because there were no grownups to keep me safe. That wasn’t a good thing. And I wasn’t always safe. I got hurt a lot because I didn’t know better. Here,” she said, pulling back her braid to show Aoife her left ear. “See? A piece of my ear accidentally got cut off.”

Kajus began to react with alarm, but Aisling waved him back down before Anna could see.

Aoife got up on her knees, putting both hands on Anna’s upper arm so she could stretch up and see. Once she saw the scar, she gasped with horrified delight and then whispered, “That’s so cool.”

Anna put the braid back in place. “Maybe it seems cool now, but none of us want you to get hurt. It wasn’t actually a good thing for me to grow up with no rules. Don’t confuse surviving with thriving.”

Aoife asked, “What’s ‘thriving’?”

Aisling explained, “It’s when you grow up safe and strong because you feel loved and wanted.” She looked sadly at Anna, and then at Kajus.

Aoife sat back down on the couch. “So...you and Daddy didn’t have that, so that’s why you both get so sad now?”

All three adults let out a sharp little breath as the child’s words hit them like a gut punch.

Gulping back the lump in his throat, Kajus said, “Yeah, Punkin. C’mere.” He reached out his arms.

Aoife leapt off of the couch, bounced over to him, crawled up into his lap, and hugged him hard as he did likewise.

Aisling dabbed at her eyes and whispered, “Sweet mother of god.” Then she sighed again and added at normal volume, “Okay. I think...maybe...we all understand each other a bit better now.” She asked Anna, “Are you okay?”

Anna shrugged. “I’m...tired. This is hard.”

“I know. I want to make it better with food because that’s how I was raised, but I guessed you probably wouldn’t want to eat socially right now.”

Anna shook her head. “Geordi told me your double fudger offer.”

Aisling laughed.

Aoife gasped and looked up from her father’s shoulder. “Double fudgers?! Are we having double fudgers?!”

Anna said, “If you behave for your parents, you can have my share.”

“Really?!” Aoife exclaimed, and then leaned forward to plant a loud smooch on Kajus’ cheek.

Kajus looked to Aisling knowingly.

Aisling said, “That’s also manipulation, kiddo.”

Aoife leaned back — once more with her arms out dramatically — and asked unto the heavens, “What?! Even a kissie is manillating now?!”

Aisling said, “Okay. We obviously have a lot of lessons still to learn going forward.”

“But...” Anna began tentatively.

“Yeah?” Aisling asked.

“Can...can I go now?”

“Oh, yeah...I mean...I’m sorry. You don’t need to be dragged into more lectures at Aoife. Let me walk you back to your quarters,” she said as she stood up.

Anna stood too and shook her head, quickly backing away from where Kajus sat. “I’m fine.”

“You’re exhausted. I can see it. I’m going to be paranoid that you passed out along the way.”

Anna continued walking backwards towards the door. “I’ll let you know when I get there safely.”

Aisling grudgingly agreed, “Fine, but I’m officially worrying until then.”

Anna nodded, smiled awkwardly towards Aoife and Kajus but without making eye contact, curtsied, and then backed out the door.



Stardate 47259.4 (Sunday 05/04/2370 16:35) — Deck Thirty-One  
— Room 5334, Anna's Quarters

Anna sent a message to Aisling that said simply, "I'm back," and then tossed the PADD aside. She pulled off her leg, hopped around the room a few times to release nervous energy, and then leaned against the wall, panting.

Once she caught her breath, she undressed, put on her soft, comforting, blue butterfly pajamas, and hopped to the bed. But she stopped short of getting in, flapping her hands lightly and staring at it as if it wasn't right.

She hopped back out to the replicator in the main room and ordered up several more of the thick blankets. Then she carried them back to the bedroom and began to line the side of the bed and the nearby wall with the folded blankets. She went back and forth several times until she'd built herself a deep nest of them.

Then she fetched the blankets and pillows from the bed and pulled them into the pile. She wormed her way in, adjusting it all tightly around her, until she finally felt as snug amongst the softness as she did in the firmness of the cabinet in her lab.

The thought occurred to her that it might be very difficult to sleep in such a pile, but the next thought was a dozy one about floating amongst warm, cuddly clouds, and before she knew it she had fallen into a deep sleep.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Stardate 47261.9 (Monday 06/04/2370 13:56) — Main Engineering

Anna spent the night and next morning hiding out in her quarters, but about an hour before first shift change she made her way down to main engineering. She was afraid someone would confront her about the drama from the day before — especially about her outburst of song in the biophysics lab — but the only attention she received as she entered from the Jefferies tube was a few polite nods and smiles of general greeting.

She sat at her usual console overlooking the warp drive, poking idly at the current drive information on the screen.

Geordi came by and asked if she was okay. She nodded and smiled politely, so he did likewise and then sat quietly behind her, working at his chief engineer's station.

Gradually she became aware of some hushed-tone gossip in the drive bay area, and shuddered, her stomach clenching, as she thought at first it was about her.

"I don't think it's possible for her to be anything other than over-the-top dramatic," said Edita with a laugh.

David asked, "Yeah, but what was she wearing?"

Anna cringed down into the collar of her engineering jumpsuit.

"What, when she passed out?" Edita asked. "Not sure."

*Passed out?* Anna thought, and then realised they weren't talking about her at all. She relaxed, though she couldn't help but still listen in.

"Apparently she's been in pretty drab browns and deep purples this whole visit," Arjun said. "Not the outlandish styles you're after, David."

"Oh, boring," David replied.

“Please,” Edita said with another laugh. “That woman is never boring. Have you ever been on transporter duty when she comes aboard and the captain’s there?”

Anna cringed again.

David also laughed, a booming sound that matched the rest of his normal speaking voice. “No, but I’ve heard she teases him mercilessly.”

Anna’s brow perked up.

Edita said, “She teases all powerful men mercilessly. I admire that about her.”

“You would,” Arjun muttered, and then uttered a faux, “Oof,” as Edita elbowed him. Then he said, “It’s kind of sad. It’s one thing when she picks on flirty jerks, but the captain’s not like that.”

David rumbled another laugh. “You clearly have no idea what a ladies’ man the captain was back in his Academy days.”

Anna cringed once more and felt queasy. She suddenly didn’t want to hear any more of their conversation, but failed to shut it out and didn’t want to be seen storming off, lest anyone notice and ask questions.

Edita said, “Not just at the Academy. I heard he was like that on the Stargazer too, until he took command.”

Arjun said, “Yeah, well, abrupt command will chill anyone out.”

Edita scoffed, “I wish. You ever met Captain Wye from the Mogami?”

David made a gagging sound and then said, “Yes. Ew.”

“Okay, fair,” Arjun said. “He’s disgusting. But our captain isn’t a creep, even if he had a...you know...horny past.”

They all giggled.

Anna couldn’t take it anymore. She stood to leave, but as she crossed the room Aisling entered from the main entrance, saw her, and headed directly for her.

“Hey, you okay?” Aisling asked.

Anna nodded unconvincingly.

Aisling raised an eyebrow. “I wish Aoife was as bad at lying as you are.” She sighed and added, “I kind of want to stuff you full of double fudgers until you’re okay.”

Anna mustered a little smile. “I’m trying to put it all behind me.” She glanced back at the drive bay, intending to mildly glare at the uncomfortable gossip but ending up distracted by the flow of the blue lights. She mused, “Maybe I need to bask in the drive’s glow for a bit.”

“It’s very therapeutic,” Aisling said. “I need to do some stuff over at the centre table but if you need anything, I’m here for you.”

“Thanks,” Anna said. She slinked her away around the corner of her usual console into the bay, and then shot up the stairs to the middle deck around the drive. There, she sat down by the railing to gaze into the lights and try to ignore the rest of the universe, including the conversation down below, which thankfully had returned back to general ship gossip punctuated by occasional statements of actual engineering work.

Just as Anna’s eyes were getting droopy in her disconnected state, she saw Data appear below, smiling politely up at her. All of a sudden she didn’t want to ignore the universe after all. She smiled back at him and waved.

But then a loud, powerful voice echoed through all of engineering, calling out, “Mr. Da Ford? If you don’t mind, Mr. Da Ford?”

Down below, Edita leaned around the corner and then turned back to Arjun and David to say, “Ambassador Troi is here!”

David leapt up from his console chair asking, “What’s she wearing!?” He hurried to peek around the corner with Edita to see.

Far from being interested in fashion, the mere mention of the presence of a Betazoid sent Anna into a total panic. She scrambled on her backside away from the drive, and then jump-climbed up the wall to the ring at the top where she’d previously hidden from Picard, once again curling herself up against the cables and conduits circling the ring, desperate to hide from view.



Down below, Data turned at the sound of Ambassador Troi's voice, but then turned back again in time to see Anna disappear up the wall and into the conduit ring.

Geordi sprang up from his station towards the main entrance, where Lwaxana stood holding the hand of the little Cairn girl rumoured to resemble Deanna's deceased elder sister. "Uh...Ambassador Troi! Hi Hedril."

"Hello," Hedril said with a friendly smile and wave.

Geordi smiled back but then awkwardly said to Lwaxana, "Um, I'm really sorry but you can't come in here."

Lwaxana gave him a stern look. "Mr. Da Ford, I promised this member of the Cairn delegation that she could see what the flagship's warp drive looks like."

"Right, okay, but unfortunately because of..." He trailed off, looking at Hedril. Then he continued, "Because of some bad stuff that happened recently, we no longer allow unplanned diplomatic tours. Because of the Tarkanians? Ambassador?" he said with a nudging tone.

"Oh. That." Lwaxana appeared briefly concerned, but then waved it away with a flick of her bejewelled hand. "But that's different. You all know who I am. I'm not some random stranger. I'm a Federation Ambassador, not to mention the mother of a senior officer."

On the starboard side of main engineering, Aisling tapped out a message on the central console and then approached.

On the port side, Data went to the replicator on the wall and said, "Object Data 472." The replicator glowed for a moment, he retrieved the small item, and then he walked into the drive bay.

Geordi squatted down to be at Hedril's eye level. "I love that you want to know about our drive, believe me. I'm proud to show it off. But we have rules. And anyway, there's a holodeck tour of it that we made ourselves, so it's just as good as seeing the real thing.

Better even, because you can interact with it and get it to explain the whole thing to you.”

Hedril tugged on Lwaxana’s arm. “We should go do that instead.”

But Lwaxana haughtily responded, “My dear, one must never back down when one has the power to be somewhere.”

Aisling stepped in front of Lwaxana, her hands clasped behind her back in standard security fashion. With a diplomatic smile she said, “Hello Ambassador. I’m afraid Lieutenant La Forge is correct.”

Geordi noted Aisling’s intervention, and started quietly pointing out some features for Hedril while keeping them all in the entryway.

Aisling utilised her primary defence against mind-reading training to clear all thoughts except for a firm mental sentence of *You are not getting past me.*

Lwaxana raised an eyebrow at her.

Aisling said aloud, still with her diplomatic smile in place, “I have my own curious little kid who always wants in here, so I get it. But it’s not happening, Ambassador.”

Lwaxana regarded Aisling for a moment, and then said, “You’re very forthright in your thoughts and words.”

“I am, Ambassador.”

Lwaxana smiled. “I like that in a human.”

“Thank you, Ambassador. Then let’s be pals and not cause a scene.”

Lwaxana let out a little laugh. “Pals?” she asked dismissively, but then she sighed resolutely. “Allies, perhaps.”

“Allies is good, Ambassador.”

“I do know what you’re doing, by the way,” Lwaxana said, eyeing Aisling carefully. “I’m aware that Starfleet has training for this. I’m also aware that humans can’t actually shut a Betazoid out fully.”

“Yes ma’am,” Aisling replied. “But as one of my uncles used to say, ‘Locks keep honest people out.’”

Lwaxana blinked as she tried to discern if she'd been insulted or praised. She narrowed her eyes and carefully said, "Ah. I suppose that's...true. Anyway, I —"

Suddenly Lwaxana turned to look down the corridor with an expression of absolute revulsion. There she saw Granny Betty-Rose approaching. "Oh," she said in disgust. "It's you."

Granny came up to them — her hands also clasped behind her back — and with a beaming, friendly smile said, "Good afternoon Ambassador Troi! Lovely to see you again!"

"It really isn't," Lwaxana said with a shudder. She tugged on Hedril's hand and said, "Come along, Hedril. Perhaps we should investigate the holodeck version instead."

Hedril nodded at Lwaxana, turned back to Geordi, waved, said, "Goodbye!" and followed Lwaxana at a fast pace away.

Geordi stood back up and breathed loudly in relief.

Granny wrinkled her nose playfully at Aisling. "I got your message."

"Clearly," Aisling replied. "I know she's spooked by you, but I don't know why."

Granny said, "My dear, you know that training she was talking about as I came along? I did that class too!" With another playful expression, she said, "I make sure all of my surface thoughts are terrible, awful things!"

Geordi winced.

Granny giggled a little. "I don't think she likes all the blood I can imagine up at a moment's notice."

Geordi said, "Granny — and I say this with complete respect — I don't think any of us like that."

"But we're very glad you're on our side to handle...that...stuff," Aisling said.

Granny gave Aisling a mild look of admonishment, "Oh honey, it's not my own violence! Tsk, I'm much, much neater than that." Then she wiggled her eyebrows. "I simply enjoy vintage horror movies and modern horror holoplays. They're ridiculously unrealistic but I find them so funny. As if blood can spurt that far."

Geordi groaned.

“Anyway, I think about that stuff and it drives her off,” Granny explained. “Thank you for the opportunity. It was fun. Peach?”

“Peach?” Aisling asked.

“I recall that your family likes peach pie?”

“Uh...yeah.”

Granny patted Aisling’s arm and walked past her down the corridor. “I’ll bring one by in time for your dinner, then. Toodles!”

When she was gone, Aisling turned to Geordi and said, “Could have been worse.”

“Don’t say it.”

“She could have offered me cherry pie.”

Geordi sighed. “You had to say it,” he said, wandering slowly back to his console.



Up in the conduit ring, Anna sat hugging her knees tightly to her chest, desperately hoping the mind-reader would leave soon and also hoping nobody had noticed her climb up to hide.

The second hope was dashed when Data appeared at the edge of the ring, climbing up to join her. He didn’t attempt to hide, however; he sat with his legs dangling openly over the edge.

Anna didn’t know what to say. One hand she was mortified, but on the other, she was glad he was there.

He reached out towards her with something in his closed hand. When she looked at it curiously, he opened his hand to reveal a small bundle of twigs held together with string.

“This is for you,” he said. “You do not need to speak. I simply wish to help. I will sit with you, unless you wish for me to leave.”

Anna bit her lip to avoid sobbing at the enormity of his gift. She slowly reached out to take it, and then clutched it to her chest, crying as silently as she could manage.

They sat there in silence for a long time, occasionally exchanging glances, while life went on below them.

Eventually Data said, "Shift change has occurred. The likelihood of anyone remaining who saw what happened is low. Ambassador Troi has been gone for some time. It is likely safe for you to descend whenever you wish. I am not rushing you. I am merely stating that your options are open. I will stay with you as long as you wish me to. I will escort you to your quarters if you wish that as well."

Anna nodded, and then opened her hand to look at the twigs and string. "This is the greatest gift anyone has ever given me," she whispered.

"I wished to express support."

Anna nodded again. "I've never felt so...understood. I don't know how to express it."

"You are not required to. I can tell it is meaningful to you, which renders it meaningful to me as well."

She turned to him with tear-rimmed eyes. "Thank you."

"You are most welcome. Are you ready to go back down?"

Anna nodded once more. Data climbed down the wall first, jumping the last portion of the way. His landing made a loud noise on the middle deck which alerted a nearby ensign, but Data waved his hand to indicate that they should ignore the situation, so they turned away.

Anna tucked the precious gift into a pocket and then came down as well, with Data positioning himself under her should she fall. She did not, so he stepped out of her way as she alighted onto the deck.

"Do you wish to remain here or go to your quarters? Or elsewhere?" he asked.

"Probably quarters is best."

He nodded and led the way down the stairs, out of engineering, and to the turbolift. There, he set it to a secure ride to the stop outside her quarters' door.

Once inside, he asked, "Do you wish me to stay?"

She nodded and sat on the couch, leaving ample room for him to join her.

Once there she retrieved the twigs and string from her pocket and began to inspect them closely, running her fingers over them reverentially. “I didn’t know how much I needed this until you gave it to me.”

“You have experienced a highly distressing week. I surmised that a literal interpretation of your grandmother’s inspirational adage may be appreciated.”

Anna blinked for a moment and then her eyes went wide. “Oh. Gosh. It’s only been a few days since I hurt my arm, hasn’t it?”

“Yes. It has been five days, four hours, forty-nine minutes, and fifty-seven seconds. You have endured significant stress in being medically treated, meeting Doctor Crusher, discovering explosives, being questioned by security, and having an altercation with the spouse of a friend. It is likely that you are fatigued. I was concerned that the sudden appearance of Ambassador Troi would be a proverbial straw upon a camel’s back. I assume you are familiar with that adage.”

“Yeah. I know that one. And it nearly was, until you made it better.”

“I am glad to be of assistance.”

“Oh Data, you’re more than mere assistance.” She looked back down at the twigs and string. “It’s more than just this. Sitting with me like that, telling me I didn’t have to talk...it’s huge, Data.” She looked at him and repeated, “It’s huge. Bigger than I can describe.”

“These were small efforts from my perspective.”

“I know. That’s part of what makes them huge.”

“I do not understand.”

She explained, “Sometimes — and to be honest I’m only just starting to learn this myself — really small things make a huge difference when you’re in need. Like a crust of bread to a starving person or the first raindrops after a drought. When your need becomes overwhelming, something that seems small to someone not overwhelmed can make all the difference for you. Like when I was on the *Fleming*. Do you know that ship?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I also know that it is the ship that rescued you from the Carbonaria.”

“Mmhm,” she said with a nod, looking down at the twigs and string again. “I talked a lot before they finally got to me, but then I sort of...wound down. Like going into power-saving mode. I got so overwhelmed that I couldn’t talk anymore. They wanted me to say more of what had happened but I...”

She shook her head and closed her eyes, paling at the horrible memories.

Then she continued, “Even now, I don’t want to talk about what he did. But I know you won’t make me.”

“I will not.”

“And they didn’t either. They asked, but didn’t press, and that helped me...breathe, a little. They were worried about me. I know that now. I think back and realise they were desperate to help, but I was too overwhelmed to take the amount of help I needed. I couldn’t talk or eat or anything.”

“That is an understandable human trauma response.”

“I know that now. Anyway I was sitting there and they were buzzing all around me, and then someone put an apple in my hand. I don’t even know who, other than the hand that gave it to me was — I think — a woman’s hand, with dark skin and a pale, golden palm. But that could have been several of them. I never saw who it was. I don’t know if they’d already started accessing the Baltimore’s records and noticed that I really like apples from the replicator logs or if it was a coincidence. But there it was, an apple in my hand: round and red and firm and perfect.

“I sat there staring at it, feeling it, the weight of it, the coolness, the tightness of the skin. I didn’t want to eat it because I was afraid I’d throw up if I did. But I was hungry. Loxos, he...he didn’t let me eat. He kept me hydrated and nourished by hypo. So I hadn’t had food in ages, like a million years. That’s what it felt like. And then suddenly...this apple was there. Perfectly there.”

She brought her right hand up to her face as if holding an apple, while her left hand closed around the twigs and string. Closing her

eyes, she said, “I started smelling it. It was absolutely gorgeous. Before I knew it, I was salivating for it, so I bit into it, and I think that was the moment I truly felt saved. From Loxos, from Covaris, from all of it. That apple — that small gift — it changed everything. I still couldn’t speak. I was still so messed up. But the apple was...a bridge. A rescue line.”

Data nodded. “I understand now what you meant about the small effort being much bigger in your perspective.”

She turned to him with a faint smile. “Yeah. In that whole miasma of horribleness, someone gave me an apple. And then today when I was frightened and on the edge of not coping, you came and sat with me and gave me twigs and string.”

“These things represent kindness, and you needed to be reminded that kindness exists.”

“Yeah. Something like that. So you can see how a ‘thank you’ feels insufficient.”

“And yet it is sufficient,” he said. “Your relief in and of itself is sufficient.”

Her smile broadened, though once again tears filled her eyes. “Why Data, you are definitely the best person I’ve ever met.” Then she laughed a little and added, “Have you ever indulged in the sensory delights of an apple?”

“I have tried apples, but I have no sense of taste.”

“But you can smell?”

“I possess a highly sensitive array of sensors in my olfactory matrix that act as human chemoreceptors for the purposes of identifying at least several trillion individual scents. So, yes, I am able to smell.”

“Well, an apple is mostly smell-taste anyway. Want to split an apple with me? I can try to explain to you how I experience an apple. It’s so much more than taste.”

“I am indeed curious as to this experience you offer.”

She stood, set the twigs and string in the middle of her small table, smiled wistfully at them for a moment, and then went to the

replicator. “One small apple, very red-skinned, McIntosh variety, sliced.”

She set the resulting plate on the table and sat at one of the two dining chairs. “Come practice smelling with me,” she said. Then she laughed lightly and added, “That sounds weird, doesn’t it?”

As Data moved to the dining table to sit with her, he said, “I have observed that the juxtaposition between the noun and verb versions of ‘smell’ appears in a significant number of comedy routines.”

“Oh?” she asked as she took a slice and began to smell it.

Data stood back up, wagged his arms back and forth as per his comedy routines, and put on his comedian-voice to say, “So I said to the fella, ‘My dog has no nose.’ And he asked me, ‘How does he smell?’ So I said, ‘Terrible!’”

Anna laughed with the little snort Data appreciated so intensely. He remained standing and telling her jokes for some time to continue to provoke that most compelling sound.



Stardate 47264.0 (Tuesday 07/04/2370 08:50) — Deep Space Four

“Good morning, Captain,” greeted Commander Rosen. “Welcome back to Deep Space Four.”

“Thank you, Commander. I have brought you the Cairn delegation in time for this afternoon’s Federation meeting.”

“You have indeed,” she replied. “And I personally thank you for not bringing me a pile of overly-explosive hull plates.”

Picard nodded. “With any luck, all of that nonsense is being dealt with by other people.” He knew she’d assume he meant Starfleet and Federation security, but in his mind he meant T’Char.

“Yes, well, hopefully they deal with whomever was interested in buying them here as well,” she said. “Come to my office. I have tea for you, and a minimal update on the Tarkanians.”

“Oh?” he asked as he followed her through the station.

“It’s not much, yet. It has only been about a month in Earth time, after all. But Yommet did send us a gift, which indicates he’s probably doing well,” she said. Entering her office, she pointed to a large, blue sculpture on the table. It appeared to be made out of some sort of glass, but within it tiny particles moved about, making it shimmer as if it was a captured flow of water.

Picard peered at it closely. “It’s remarkable. Quite intriguing.”

“Yeah. It’s nice to stare at. Very meditative,” Rosen said. “Anyway there was a note of appreciation for all of us and a promise to contact us again soon. So here’s to hoping for good things.”

“Good things would be quite welcome,” Picard said as he sat on her couch. “I think we could all use an influx of good news for a change.”



# 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 ongoing coronavirus pandemic 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.

The “Double Fudgers” cookies mentioned in this book are based on my recipe here: <https://www.eat-the-evidence.com/2012/12/12/world-domination-chocolate-chip-cookies/>