

SPACEDAD STORIES

THE DISTANCE THAT BINDS

Book Two

A Work of Fan Fiction

By Kimberly Chapman



SpaceDad Book Two

**THE
DISTANCE
THAT BINDS**

KIMBERLY CHAPMAN

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

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

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

*“There are times, sir, when men of good conscience cannot
blindly follow orders.”*

Jean-Luc Picard

CONTENT WARNING

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

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

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

Sensitive topics covered in this series include:

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

Stardate 47154.8 (Thursday 26/02/2370, 12:10) — USS Enterprise
NCC-1701-D — Main Engineering

Specialist Anna White stood on the upper deck surrounding the warp core, leaning on the railing as she watched the engineering staff go about their duties below. She had a tricorder in her hand that she occasionally pretended to look at, but in reality she was studying the people and not the engine. Dilithium crystals, intermix chambers, and plasma manifolds were easy for Anna to understand; people were confusing and difficult to pin down to a set of consistent rules.

She had thought herself prepared for whatever might happen when she'd arrived on board the Enterprise thirteen days before. She'd expected stress about being around so many people and trying to keep them all happy. She'd known there'd be a great deal of anxiety about the ship's captain and avoiding him at all costs. She'd anticipated some small amount of worry about the technical tasks she was actually there to perform. She'd dared to hope for some nice things to happen as well — and some of them had — but everything she'd prepared for turned out to be nothing like what had happened at all.

I can't believe it's only been thirteen days, she thought. In thirteen days I've made actual, real friends. I think. Maybe. Hopefully? Anna sighed, reflecting on how kind Data and Geordi had been to her and desperately hoping it was all real.

In thirteen days I've been given my own lab which I filled with junk while trying to figure out how a mercenary ship was hiding its hull from sensors, been thrown around that lab during red alerts and ship-to-ship battles, had a total breakdown at the first party I've ever been to and then ran away from it like the loser that I am, been told the father who never wanted me was dead and then been

told he's actually still alive and back on the ship, and in thirteen days I've had someone reach out a hand to help me three separate times. Three times I've held someone's hand in thirteen days, after having never done that in my whole life before.

Anna grimaced at herself. *No, all of that happened in ten days, because for the last three days I've been hiding out in my quarters and that lab, terrified to be around people again, telling Geordi and Data that I wasn't up to company when actually I was lonely but too messed up to talk to them or anyone else. They must think I'm a coward, or shirking my responsibilities, or both.*

It was that last notion that had forced her to return that morning before the day shift began. *Can't stay hiding forever*, she thought, and then whisper-sang, *"Can't just stay in my own little corner, all alone in my own little chair."* She glanced around herself, realizing she'd merely replaced one little corner for another, but figured skulking about watching people and trying to understand how the physical contact she'd received fit in with what she observed between others was at least a step towards socialising again.

All throughout those solitary years of her childhood — growing up in the crashed remains of a ship she never should have been on in the first place — she'd longed to be able to touch another person. She'd never had much in the way of affection from the adults in her life before leaving Earth on the SS Baltimore, and then nothing at all for nearly twenty years alone on Covaris Two.

It was thus unsurprising that when she'd finally been rescued, she'd thrown her arms around the man who'd beamed her aboard his ship. She'd been completely naive without a shred of worry that anybody would ever use a moment like that against her...

Anna shuddered and quickly slammed the memory of what had happened next back in the tightly locked box in her mind where it belonged. She closed her eyes to force the terror and nausea back down inside before any of it leaked out here in front of everyone.

Yes, everyone, she thought, dragging her mind back to the present. *Look at them. Look at how they interact: they talk, they smile, and most of them touch each other. They pat each other's*

shoulders. They nudge elbows when they make jokes. They do that “high five” slap thing when they accomplish something. They’re there for each other in both words and by touch.

She found herself wishing one of them would stumble — not in any injurious way, of course — so she could see if the others would reach out to help them up as Geordi had done for her. Or for there to be a dangerous step one of them would have to get over to see if someone would offer a hand as Data had at the nacelle. She watched the merging and shifting groups of engineers closely for any interaction that prompted physical contact, desperate to figure out what was normal and what rules may be at play.

She’d worried at first she might be caught in this bit of espionage and had no idea what the social ramifications of that would be, but it quickly became apparent that nobody was paying attention to her up there on the deck. That was comforting insofar as not being caught, but it also reminded her that she wasn’t part of this crew, which only intensified her feeling of being an outsider to humanity in general.

Invisibility is useful but kind of pathetic, she thought.

But then Data walked into view and immediately looked up towards the deck, his eyes scanning along until he saw her there in the shadow behind the core. He smiled politely and lifted his hand in greeting, and in that moment all of Anna’s troubling thoughts and worries dissipated. She smiled back at him, and was suddenly glad she’d decided to show herself once more.



Stardate 47154.8 (Thursday 26/02/2370, 12:10) — Picard’s Quarters

Twenty-eight decks above, Jean-Luc Picard’s troubling thoughts and worries were barely held at bay under the pretence of work. He sat in his favourite chair which was neither little nor in a

corner, nor had he ever wished to hide in such a manner. He drank his tea while reading and replying to the seemingly unending deluge of communications from Starfleet, queries from his own crew, and an unusually high number of personal correspondences since he'd been declared dead and word had since gotten around that he was, in fact, quite alive after all.

His time away on leave and then unexpectedly aboard Arctus Baran's mercenary vessel had caused a backlog that he was only just beginning to surmount. Usually after an adventure of that duration and magnitude, he'd triage the communications to abandon those that didn't really need his attention to his rarely-read "Later" file.

But on this day he sat and read every single message in order, dutifully replying to each and every one in significant detail. He'd done the same the evening before until he'd been exhausted enough to sleep without further thought. Reassuring every individual admiral back at Starfleet HQ that he was fine and expressing his gratitude to them along with every friend who'd written to wish him well upon his apparent resurrection was better than having to spend even one uncomfortable moment contemplating what unknowns were lurking for him down on Deck Thirty-One in Room 5334.

Not that he'd memorised White's room number. Not that he'd confirmed her location at least a dozen times over the last few days via the ship's computer and found she was there each and every time. Not that he'd kept an ear open to see if anybody mentioned her at all, or wondered if she was even alive in there, or if he'd just imagined the whole scandalous business. *No, these are unwelcome distractions and I have a job to do*, he told himself firmly as he began to tap the PADD with words of appreciation of being alive to yet another distant friend he hadn't heard from otherwise in years.

He took a deep breath and opened the next message, delighted to find that it was not yet another bit of applause at having not been murdered, but an actual assignment briefing. He put his empty cup

down on the low table in front of him and sat up to properly read Admiral Chekote's instructions to proceed as his first officer had originally agreed with Commander Rosen of Deep Space Four, ten days ago.

Is that all? Only ten days? he thought, shaking his head. He performed the mental math and realised that indeed, the day he'd been abducted by Baran was the same day Riker had casually agreed to pick up the Tarkanian delegation from Deep Space Four and take them to a conference at Starbase 718. It felt as though he'd spent weeks on that other ship, testing artifacts in that cargo hold, desperate to find a way back to this very room.

Picard sighed, shook his head again, and read Chekote's message. They were to proceed as originally planned to DS4 but keep the visit short to make up for lost time, then take the Tarkanians to the starbase. The Admiral made it clear that the Federation was of a mind to court the long-elusive Tarkanian people towards potential membership and felt this was an excellent opportunity to initiate full diplomatic procedures.

The Federation had known of the Tarkanians since its inception because they were known to the Vulcans from centuries past. Their home world was well beyond Federation space towards the galactic centre, but nobody from any Federation world had seen it or even knew its name or location. Tarkanians were primarily known to have once been in mercantile partnership with Romulans before the latter species had gone into its multigenerational isolation period from which they'd only recently emerged. Whatever had happened between the two peoples, the Tarkanians seemed to have likewise withdrawn into relative seclusion until the past few years, when scientific and diplomatic missions had begun to sporadically appear at border facilities such as DS4.

Chekote made it clear that it was in the Federation's interest to appear warmly welcoming before the Romulans had a chance to woo the Tarkanians back themselves. Therefore, Picard had orders to proceed to DS4 and extend "every level of gracious hospitality

towards our new friends at the highest diplomatic level,” as Chekote put it.

Well that’s my social calendar set for the next while, I suppose, he thought. He rose with the PADD in hand and headed to the bridge.



Data hurried up the ladder to the upper warp core deck to stand beside Anna at the railing. “It is good to see you again,” he said in full sincerity.

The three days she had spent isolated in her quarters had disturbed him because he had not known how to help or if help was even wanted. Geordi had several times expressed a concern that she might leave, that the Enterprise had turned out to be much more chaotic than she likely expected, and that he too did not know the correct boundaries between offering assistance versus leaving her in peace.

“Are you feeling better?” Data asked, although he had already gauged by her smile that she likely was.

“Yes, thank you. I’m sorry I stayed away.”

“It was clear you needed some time. I would have preferred your first week aboard to have been less tumultuous.”

“Yeah, me too.”

He pointed to the tricorder in her hand. “What are you investigating today?”

She laughed a little and admitted, “I’m just holding this so nobody will notice what I’m really up to.” She leaned in closer to him and whispered, “I’m people-watching.”

“Ah, I see. I do that frequently myself.”

“I thought you might. That’s the only reason I told you.”

“Have you made any interesting observations?”

“If by ‘interesting’ you mean ‘confusing and contradictory’, then yes. I’ve been particularly paying attention to physical contact,” she said, looking back down at the others below.

Data nodded. “The social rules about touch are quite inconsistent and difficult to determine, particularly between different groups even within one culture, let alone across cultures or even varying humanoid species.”

“Exactly. I thought it was so strange how both you and Geordi offered me literal helping hands, but now I see that is commonplace.”

“You appeared to be quite moved by it at the nacelle.”

She turned to him again and smiled once more, this time bigger, in that unique way she had of capturing more of his attention in a moment than he had previously thought possible. He began to study the parameters of this compelling smile, recording several measurements across her face: pupil dilation, percentage of teeth shown, changes in cheek and lip colour, and any other metric he could readily observe.

“I was moved,” she confirmed. “More than I can say. Thank you for that, and for everything.” The smile disappeared and she sighed as she turned back to the others below. “But in watching them all down there, I can’t figure out the rules. Some of it is obviously just that certain people favour each other, and that makes sense to me, but why are some people not favoured at all? Is there a bad history, or is it shyness? There are three distinct groups operating amongst themselves, and sometimes one goes from one group to another and it’s all very fluid, but look in the corner there by the impulse monitoring station.”

Data saw Lieutenant Reginald Barclay at that station, standing askance at the console, entering commands but with a wary eye to everyone else moving about the room. He nodded. “Mr. Barclay does not often engage with the rest of the crew.”

“Yes, I’ve seen that all morning, and when I spoke to him last week it was clear he’s very...awkward.”

“That would be an appropriate word, yes.”

Anna leaned on the railing, her shoulders slumping a little. “He never touches anyone and nobody ever touches him. The couple of times someone’s gone to talk to him, he stands defensively and

nervously, I think? At first I thought perhaps something awful must've happened to him, because I know what it's like to want to shrink away from someone coming towards you, but nobody's come at him aggressively and he knows these people. Then again, nobody's come towards him particularly kindly like you and Geordi do for me. So why is he outcast like that? Or am I just imagining it? And if he is outcast, why? Should I be worried about him or for him? Whose responsibility is it to make someone feel included? Or is this a chicken-and-egg thing where he's the one who isolated himself first? He doesn't look happy about any of it but he's not doing anything to change it and neither is anybody else. What are the rules here? What's right and what's...creepy? Where are the boundaries and how do we see them?"

Data replied, "Those are all excellent questions. I believe the rules and boundaries change with every iteration. I can tell you in the case of Mr. Barclay, he does choose to frequently isolate himself, but as to whether or not that is a defensive mechanism or a conscious preference, I cannot say. There have been attempts to increase his socialization amongst the engineering crew, but they have not been entirely successful."

"So someone's tried to be kind to him? You and Geordi, at least?"

"Yes. But there have been some past issues on all sides that have made it...difficult."

"I guess I'm just seeing it from the outside and wishing everyone could be as happy together like Sorenson's merry little group over there," she said, nodding towards the loudest group in the room surrounding Lieutenant David Sorenson.

Data watched her watch the others for a moment, observing her readily apparent emotional reactions to what she saw below. He recognised her expressions as signifying longing when she regarded the tightly-knit groups, and clear concern and sympathy for Barclay. The latter reminded him of similar expressions he had observed on Counselor Troi's face whenever she regarded Barclay;

he surmised that Anna might be of an equally “big-hearted” mindset, as he had heard several people describe the Counselor.

“It’s not fair,” Anna continued. “Especially not for people like you and me.”

“I am certain we are welcome to join them at any time,” he suggested.

“No, I mean the part where we’re trying to make sense of something that has no sense to it. You and I each came into this grown-up social world without having the benefit of growing into it ourselves. We didn’t get that gradual learning that children are supposed to get. We were both dropped into it like, ‘Boom, here you are now, cope with all of this,’” she said, waving her arms around in the air. “‘Figure it out, sink or swim, have fun, bye.’”

“It has been challenging at times, but I have enjoyed the learning process for the most part. I believe your situation has been significantly more difficult.”

“Maybe,” she said with a shrug. “I feel so nervous all the time that I’ll get something wrong. I paid dearly for getting it wrong the first time and I’m afraid of getting it so badly wrong again that more awful things happen.”

Data surmised she was referring to her abduction and assault by Robert Loxos, and immediately sought to reassure her. “You are safe here. Even though there is awkwardness and occasional interpersonal conflict, you will not be harmed by anybody aboard the Enterprise, least of all because of a social misunderstanding.”

She glanced up at him sadly, and he did not like that expression at all. He experienced a significant need to shelter her somehow, even though he knew what he had just said about her relative safety was entirely true. The desperate fear in her eyes was bad enough, but the sad resignation that overlaid it was extremely concerning. Amidst a conversation about physical contact, Data found himself caught between conflicting imperatives to reach out to Anna in comfort but also to respect her personal space lest she misinterpret such actions and be frightened by him. Even the smallest calculated possibility of upsetting her set off every ethical,

moral, and personal alarm in his programming. So he did nothing, and she turned away again. Data frowned, wondering if he had just failed her.

“I know nobody here is likely to do anything really awful,” she said softly. “The thing is, I’m only just getting used to my body being mine again, and it’s scary to think how easily that can be undone. Because for so long, my body stopped being mine. Loxos stole it, everyone at The Institute locked it up and punished it. I didn’t belong to me and it took a long time to try to feel like I did again, holed up by myself in a tiny English flat. For so long I couldn’t stand anybody even being close to me, let alone touching me, because it felt like...like they were trying to take something of me away, even if they didn’t mean to. But somehow when you reached your hand out to me at the nacelle...”

The urge to reach out to her in some way once again dominated his processing, but he continued to stand absolutely still rather than risk offence.

She wiped a tear away from her cheek. “That was so different. It was so important.” She turned to him again and desperately explained, “That was the first time I really felt someone offering me a touch that wasn’t taking. I don’t know exactly what it was, if it was you or the situation or how you reached out or what, but there was something there that told me you weren’t trying to take my hand; you were giving me yours. And that was huge. Why, it was like someone turned on the lights and I could finally see that I was mine, and that I could stay mine and still be close to someone else! So a couple of days later when Geordi offered me his helping hand I was able to see it in that light. You built that bridge, Data. You gave me that. I will never forget that moment as long as I live.”

More tears rolled out of her eyes and she did not wipe them away. Data knew this was a very fragile moment and he was in the midst of calculating optimal responses when his combadge interrupted with Commander Riker’s voice to order, “*Senior staff to the observation lounge.*”

Anna grimaced. “Sorry, I went off into a bit of a depressing tailspin there. Probably not supposed to pour my weird heart out all over the warp deck like that.”

“On the contrary; I found your words profoundly meaningful and I am honoured to have assisted you in such an important way, especially since my original intent was simply to ensure you did not trip on the step.”

She laughed a little and wiped her cheeks with the backs of her hands. Her smile returned and though it was a muted version of the one he found so compelling, aspects of it were there. He immediately took note of the similarities and differences, recording everything into a comparative file he intended to compile for some time to come.

“You are always so kind and understanding,” she said.

Data was highly reluctant to leave, but knew his duty superseded personal preferences. “I must go now, but I would like very much to speak of these things with you more at a later time.”

Anna nodded. “Well, once I tear myself away from watching everyone else work, I was planning to go start prepping EPS conduits for the new phase-synchronisation software routines that’ll be implemented with the new core. I’ve been messaging with Geordi about it and he agreed that it’s wise to get that going before the installation rather than playing catch-up with any discrepancies after the fact, on account of people generally not appreciating power outages. He’s given me a code to get into the drive section’s horizontal Jefferies tubes, so I figured I’d start at the top and work my way down, if you want to come help me take readings and swap in new protocols later.”

“Pending what will be required of me after this meeting, I would like very much to assist you and converse further. I will locate you within the tubes at my earliest availability.”

“Okay,” she said, so he turned to leave. But as he reached the ladder she said, “Oh, Data? One other thing?”

He turned back to her and replied, “Yes?”

“I feel like I should be honest and say I don’t really need help with the EPS stuff. I’ve done that sort of thing a zillion times all by myself before. I’d really just like the company.”

Data nodded. “I know. That was my primary motivation as well.”

Anna’s full smile returned. “Thank you, Data. For absolutely everything.”

“You are most welcome,” he said, and then left quickly before his preference to stay risked overwhelming him.



Stardate 47154.9 (Thursday 26/02/2370, 13:00) — Observation Lounge

“Right,” Picard said as he sat down at his usual position at the end of the long table. “Let’s discuss the Tarkanians, shall we?”

“I had Worf begin research on what security concerns might need to be addressed with them when we first learned we’d be giving them a ride,” Riker said. “I intended to have Data check into what accommodations they’d require but before any of us could get into the diplomacy of it all, we were...sidetracked,” he said with a cheeky grin.

“Indeed, Number One. But now that you and I have retired from our exciting life of piracy upon the high seas, I’m afraid it’s back to the mundane matter of satisfying the whims of our Federation masters, and the Federation wants us to begin the formal bridgework towards this freshly re-emerging species.”

“That’s not surprising, given the panel discussion about them I attended at the conference on Starbase 247 ten days ago,” Troi said.

“Oh?” Picard asked with great interest. “Do tell, Counselor.”

“Re-emerging is exactly what the Tarkanians appear to be doing, or at least some of them,” she explained. “What we’re

seeing is a conflicted society, pulled between opposing forces of traditional isolationists and a new, younger set who are fully determined to push beyond their borders and do exactly what the Federation does: seek out other species and exchange both cultural and scientific information with them.”

“We do not even know where their borders lie,” Worf reported. “Even the location and name of their homeworld is unknown to outsiders.”

“The last known Tarkanian colony now lies in Federation space,” Data said. “The Cruces system — near both the Neutral Zone and Starbase 718 — once housed a thriving Tarkanian world, but the Tarkonians abandoned it over three hundred years ago. We have no information as to why.”

“And it has remained unpopulated until recently,” Worf added. “The Enterprise carried a Tarkonian diplomat named Gologg Naugmoat to the Arloff system approximately two and a half years ago. He departed the ship on stardate...” He picked up a PADD from the table in front of him and read, “44765.8. He was reported to have travelled from there to the Cruces system on stardate 44769.2 but then disappeared under mysterious circumstances. I noted this at the time because I was tracking movements of all Enterprise guests during the...unfortunate situation with Admiral Satie,” the big Lieutenant said with uncharacteristic sheepishness.

Picard subtly raised his right hand a little towards Worf in assurance to indicate the incident was all well in the past and not worth fretting about any longer.

Data continued, “The new colony on Cruces Four is little more than a spaceport at this stage, comprised of multiple Federation citizens seeking to establish potential trade across the Neutral Zone, should the Romulans continue on their present course of more open relations outside of their borders.”

La Forge added, “There’s also a Starfleet science office there, intended to eventually replace the lost Delta-05 outpost. But as of their last report two weeks ago it’s just one officer in one room of the spaceport.”

“Indeed,” Data confirmed. “While the spaceport is built within the remnants of a Tarkanian city, it is no longer considered Tarkanian in any other way, even by the Tarkanians themselves.”

“That is why the disappearance of Naugmoat was mysterious,” Worf explained. “As far as we have been able to tell, he was visiting for personal reasons on his way back towards Tarkanian space, not on any official Tarkanian mission that might threaten the new colony’s claim on the planet.”

Troi said, “The panel experts at the conference said that Tarkanian culture considers any remnants of their previous colonies in Federation and Romulan territory to be so tainted as to be worse than foreign. There are some in the old guard who consider those ancient cities to be entirely taboo to even be mentioned, much less visited, which of course makes them appealing in both a nostalgic and rebellious sense to the younger, more outreaching sorts.”

“All right, tell me more about this cultural schism,” Picard said. “In particular, do we know on which side our expected guests lie?”

“I don’t know about the incoming delegation specifically, but I can tell you about the general upheaval that appears to be going on, or at least what rumours have been passed along from those who regularly go in and out of Federation space towards galactic centre,” Troi said.

“Please do,” Picard requested.

“As with any of these deeply private cultures, it’s difficult to sort out what’s true and what’s rumour, especially when the rumours are so readily passed around and exaggerated. What’s known for certain is that their traditionally stratified culture is being challenged by those who have been reaching adulthood over the last five or six years, and supported in even greater numbers amongst the adolescents. As far as we know it hasn’t reached a violent, revolutionary stage yet, in large part because it appears that it is primarily driven by the academic castes who have sought greater relations outside of their region for some time. They are said to have recently formed an alliance with the religious caste

against the military one due to some influential religious figures preaching a more peace-based philosophy than previous generations,” Troi explained.

“Klingon society has experienced similar upheavals throughout our history,” Worf said.

“Exactly,” Troi agreed. “And it would seem that this younger generation coming up likes what the academics and philosophers have to say, including even the younger members of powerful military families. As you can imagine, this is causing a great deal of stress between the generations, with the traditional isolationists seeking to tighten their grip on these young folks straining to break free and visit other worlds.”

Picard chuckled. “That never goes well for the older generation, does it?”

Troi shook her head. “Generally not, but Tarkanians know so little of external cultural history that they don’t have the benefit of that information. The lecturer at the conference said the ruling elite still appears to side with the military, but there’s a clear battle of opinions going on about who they want to be as a species; the military wants to conquer but they no longer have the means to do so after so long in isolation, and they want the academics to improve their weapons and defence systems. The researchers are screaming back that they can’t advance at a quick enough pace without being allowed to speak to outsiders, and quite rightly point out that they can’t get advice from those outsiders if the outsiders expect to be bombed in return. The religious enforcers want their faith to stay pure but seem to recognise the dispirited youth is at risk of bolting from the faith entirely if they don’t modernise to some degree. And apparently caught in the middle are the members of the general public who simply want to get on with their lives in relative peace and prosperity, which makes those on the side of nonviolent expansion the most popular, which in turn creates pressure on the ruling elite.”

“Sounds like a vicious circle,” Riker mused.

“It’s difficult to know how vicious at this stage,” Troi replied. “The best information we have is that some missions have been going out without approval but also without punishment, or with accompaniment by official military ‘protection’,” she said, making air quotation marks with her fingers.

“Ah, much as the Romulans do whenever they concede to allow one of their scientists attend a function outside of their borders,” Picard said.

“I would anticipate a similar situation in this case, yes,” Troi confirmed. “Based on what Commander Rosen requested on behalf of the Tarkanian delegation, it is most likely comprised of some scientists who wish to attend the upcoming science and research conference on Starbase 718 and an accompaniment of military guards who will pretend to be there to protect their scientists but are actually more likely in the role of keeping the scientists on a short leash.”

“If that is indeed the case, it would behoove us to placate the guards and warmly welcome the scientists,” Picard suggested.

“Exactly,” La Forge agreed. “Let the Romulans woo the old guard, we can be the happy, friendly Federation rolling out the carpet for the rest.”

“What do we know about their physiology?” Riker asked. “Food requirements? Accommodation specifications? Didn’t I read somewhere that they have tails? Do we need specialised chairs?”

Troi replied, “The lecturer mentioned tails as one of the long-held but never substantiated rumours about Tarkanians.”

“I have heard that rumour as well,” Worf said. “And even that the tails may have weapon-like qualities.”

“There’s no evidence of that beyond wild speculation,” Troi replied.

Worf nodded. “True, but given their Romulan-like love of secrecy, I still consider it a security threat to be noted.”

“What sort of ‘weapon-like qualities?’” Picard asked.

Worf replied, “That is unclear. Everything I have heard is based on ancient stories which contradict each other, but the idea of

Tarkanians having ‘dangerous’ tails has come up often enough to be...notable.”

“Right,” Picard said, but with a hint of disapproval at the vague nature of the report. “Keep it notable then, but remember we’re welcoming this party aboard so I want security forces kept in diplomatic mode, not investigating ancient rumours.”

“Understood, sir,” Worf said.

Troi continued, “What we do know for certain is this: Tarkanians are pale-skinned but some have many tattoos and these may be related to caste and rank. They are hairless with wide, dark eyes, similar to Saurians but both species are offended at any mention of a possible shared ancestry. While we do have DNA profiles of Saurians, we only have limited information on Tarkanians in that respect, so it’s difficult to determine anything for certain, although the lecturer speculated they probably are distant cousins in the way that the mammalian humanoids are, confirmed by the culmination of Professor Galen’s research,” she said with a respectful nod to Picard.

Picard nodded solemnly in return.

“We also know their infant stage is amphibious — a trait which is not shared by the Saurians — and during that stage the Tarkanians are highly attuned to underwater communication both audio and visual,” Troi said. “We believe some of that is lost when they reach adulthood and shed their gills as they become entirely terrestrial, though they do remain adept swimmers. They have multi-jointed limbs that make them excellent climbers and acrobats, though they are rumoured to be physically much weaker than most humanoids known to the Federation, similar in some ways to low-gravity species such as Elaysians.

“For our purposes, however, they shouldn’t require any particularly unusual accommodations, at least not that I’ve heard about. Oh, they don’t have thumbs, but instead have a four very long fingers with a much wider range of movement than ours. As for dietary needs, I’m afraid the lecture didn’t cover that at all. I’d advise asking Commander Rosen what they’ve been eating aboard

Deep Space Four and ensuring our replicators are prepared accordingly.”

“I’ll be contacting Rosen anyway for a full report, so I’ll make sure I ask about that,” Riker said. “At this point, she’s probably had more direct contact with them than anyone else in Starfleet. From what I’ve been able to learn, even the Federation traders that have dealt with them have rarely done so in person until very recently.”

Troi nodded. “We are definitely breaking new ground here. It’s not a first contact situation, but I advise adhering to many of the same protocols for the time being.”

“Agreed,” Picard said. “Let’s all go gather what information we can, then, and prepare to roll out whatever shade and style of red carpet is required.”

CHAPTER TWO

Stardate 47155.1 (Thursday 26/02/2370, 14:30) — Third Intersection of Jefferies Tube Thirty-Four Between Decks Thirty-Four and Thirty-Five

Data opened the Jefferies tube hatch to find Anna working on an EPS conduit. She had an E13 panel opening tool sticking out of one of her braided buns and her artificial leg was cast off to the side.

“Big meeting done with?” she asked with a smile.

“For now. How are your adjustments coming along?”

“Highly comforting in their tedious repetition,” she said as she turned back to the open panel in front of her. “I gather most people hate this kind of thing, but I find it soothing. I like making everything in a line all matchy-matchy.” She grinned at him once more. “This tube’s almost done which puts me about third of the way through.”

“You are very efficient.” He crawled on his hands and knees to her side, then turned to sit opposite her. “Would you like me to do the rest on this side?”

“Why thank you, yes, that would be quite helpful,” she said as she took the E13 out of her hair and handed it to him. When he accepted it with raised eyebrows, she laughed. “I’m sure it’s against a dozen regulations to keep tools stuck in your hair but it’s just how I’m used to doing things. Small ones fall out of pockets or I can’t find where I’ve set them down, and I find it really difficult to manage a toolbox when I’m crawling around in these tubes. That’s been the hardest part today, actually.”

“Why?”

“All of the Baltimore’s horizontal tubes were turned up to be mostly vertical for me and there were hardly any the other way around. Turns out crawling on my right knee is really

uncomfortable,” she said with a grunt as she tightened a bracket back into place over the conduit she’d just upgraded. “At first I couldn’t tell what I was supposed to do with the fake leg, so I dragged while it was still on me but that got old fast. So I took it off and carried it with me but that was about as much fun as you’d imagine.”

Data’s brow furrowed. “I would not imagine it to be fun at all.”

“Exactly.” She hoisted the panel cover back into place and reached out for the E13, so having opened his own panel already he handed it back to her. “After that I kind of fell back into my old routines of sticking tools where they stay put but I can get them easily. Just be glad I learned many years ago not to hold them in my teeth.”

“That would not be in keeping with any safety or hygiene protocols.”

“Yeah, I learned that the hard way. You don’t want to know. Anyway, I’ve got it all working okay-ish today but I’m going to have a good, long think about these tubes and how I can move through them better in the future. My knee can’t take much of this.”

“Have you injured yourself?”

“No, but if I kept going by crawling I might. That knee just isn’t used to that kind of punishment.”

“Perhaps you should stop for the day.”

Anna scooted on her backside down to the next panel in the series. “I’m fine, really. After three days of sitting alone in my quarters, the last thing I want to do is go hide some more. I’m not going to figure out anything useful about personal interaction while sitting all alone wondering why people do all of these weird things, am I?”

Data tilted his head to one side. “While I do often find it useful to sit quietly alone and contemplate social interactions, logically those interactions must be observed first or there would be nothing to contemplate.”

“Exactly. I was watching all morning to see if any of them touched each other’s faces, because I was thinking in my quarters yesterday about that gift you made for Geordi’s birthday with his parents’ faces so he could touch them. Only, nobody in engineering did that. So now I’m wondering if that’s not a thing people usually do, and if so why not, because people touch each other’s hands constantly from what I can see, but hardly ever faces. It’s weird because they’re both sensitive areas and both exposed to everyone, but I guess hands are for touching and faces aren’t?”

Data completed an EPS conduit upgrade and replaced the panel. He was about to ask for the E13 again but she was already handing it to him, her eyes fixed on her own panel. He took it as he replied, “I believe face-touching requires a great deal more trust due to the location of fragile humanoid eyes.”

Anna sat back and frowned in thought. “Oh yeah. I hadn’t thought about that. Hm.” She poked her cheeks with her fingers. “There’s a lot of space here, though, without getting near my eyes, but I suppose yes, you wouldn’t want just anyone coming at you like that. I wouldn’t, anyway, and I’ve never touched anyone else’s face either. Well not with my hand, anyway. I’ve hit one face with a medical tray and thrown food in another, but I can honestly say I have no idea what it’s like to touch a person’s face in any sort of kindly way.”

“Never?” he asked.

She turned to him. “Not that I’m aware of. Maybe in infancy? Why, is that weird?”

“I am uncertain. It is not a metric I have specifically counted for myself or anyone else within my observation.” He moved closer to her and added, “Would you like to? Would that help you feel less ‘weird’?”

Anna’s eyes widened. “Oh. I hadn’t even thought...I didn’t mean to...” She blinked, laughed nervously, and then asked, “Are you sure?”

“Yes, if you would like. I do not have any issues with trust regarding it, as it would be nearly impossible for anybody to cause harm to my face in any irreparable way.”

“Why, I’d never try to hurt you! You’re the nicest person I know.”

Data leaned forward a little, pushing his chin forward to offer his face to her.

She laughed nervously again, but moved towards him, carefully reaching out with her right hand to put her fingertips on his left cheek, and then her full palm, her eyes darting back and forth between her hand and his eyes. “That’s amazing,” she whispered.

“Is it?”

“You can feel my hand, right? Your skin has sensors for that?”

“Yes. I can detect your body temperature and pulse from this level of contact.”

“I suppose that’s quite handy.” Then she laughed and lifted her hand away, wiggling her fingers. “Handy!” she repeated.

“Ah yes, a good pun!” he said with a smile.

Her laughter subsided. “Thank you for that. You’re very kind.” She wrinkled her nose. “I feel like I say that a lot.”

“You say it frequently, but it is appreciated.”

“Is it too much, though? I’ve been worrying maybe I say it too much.”

“I am not aware of any social rule establishing a numerical limit on sincere compliments.”

She smiled at him once again in that manner he particularly enjoyed. “That is very good to know. Thank you, for all of this.”

“You are quite welcome,” he said as he leaned back to a more standard position. “It is, as the idiom goes, ‘no skin off of my nose’.”

Anna laughed again. “Well I should hope not! I shudder to think what it’d take to damage your skin, and I’d never do it! It’s a lot tougher than this flimsy stuff isn’t it?” she asked as she pinched her own cheeks.

“Significantly so,” he confirmed.

“I think your skin is amazing. It’s sparkly like butterfly wings.”

Data’s brow furrowed again. “I was unaware that butterflies sparkle. Or do you mean artificial ones?”

“No, I mean biological ones. Sparkle isn’t quite the right word though...it’s that they have tiny protective scales that look like a sort of gold-ish dust on them. And your skin has that too, that gold-ish dusty look. It’s lovely.”

“Thank you.”

Anna turned around to finish the panel she was working on, so Data did likewise with his. “I’m kind of jealous,” she said. “I’d trade you a bucket of my being over-emotional about everything for a bit of your butterfly sheen.”

“If such a thing was possible, I would make that trade.”

“I guess we’ll just have to hang around each other enough to make up for it.”

“I would like that very much,” he replied.



Stardate 47155.1 (Thursday 26/02/2370, 15:00) — Ready Room

Picard sipped his afternoon tea in his ready room while going over Starfleet’s latest briefings on the Tarkanians and other unfamiliar species in these sectors, but there was little of use in there compared to Troi’s incredibly helpful report. Skimming through a Starfleet Intelligence report from the previous year, he thought to himself that the intelligence service could use an improved partnership with people like Deanna: those who were out here putting their skills to work for the broader goal of exploration and meeting other species rather than intentionally spying upon them. *I know I’d be more inclined to have a heart-to-heart with the likes of her in a friendly context versus an interrogation, even a civil one*, he thought. *And that’s speaking as someone who’s had to find ways to keep her out of my head at times.* He tossed the PADD

with the intelligence report on the desk. *Why do those sorts always think they can cloak-and-dagger their way to understanding a culture?* “Save it for the holodeck,” he muttered.

Oh now that’s a thought! It’s been ages since I’ve taken some R&R in the holodeck. Perhaps I should see if Data’s up for some Dixon Hill before we get to Deep Space Four.

His wandering mind was brought back into focus by the chime at his door. “Come,” he said, and Riker strode in waving a PADD of his own.

“I’ve just spoken with Rosen. She had a report ready for me,” he said as he passed his leg over the chair and sat down.

“That’s handy,” Picard replied.

Riker chuckled. “Yeah, you’d think so,” he said as he placed the PADD in front of Picard on the desk. “But after speaking to her, it’s pretty clear to me that she’s being this thorough because she wants to be thoroughly rid of them.”

Picard’s brows went up. “Oh? Are we in for trouble?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘trouble’, necessarily, but it sounds like there’s a lot going on here just like Deanna said. The Tarkanians claim to all be scientists going to the conference, but Rosen’s certain only one of them actually is and the other five are all military escorts. She seems willing to indulge the scientist’s quirks and curiosities in the name of welcoming diplomacy, but the military ones haven’t stopped rocking the boat from the moment they got on the station, from the sounds of it.”

“Lovely.”

“Yeah. The scientist’s name is Doctor Imnel Yommet, and he apparently tries to be easy to please but manages to fail. Rosen says he will claim to have no needs of any particular accommodations — either personal or professional — but then it becomes clear that he actually does have needs that she’s had to suss out one by one.”

“Ah yes, like Commander Vrigan whenever I’ve had to deal with her as part of a cultural outreach initiative,” Picard said. “Always tells you not to make a fuss —“

“And then nothing is up to her standards that she’s never told you about,” Riker agreed. “I met her a couple of years ago and experienced that unique exhaustion myself. I have a cousin like that too. So anyway, yeah, this Doctor Yommet is like that, but Rosen said she’s gotten used to anticipating the actual needs and she’s sent us a list of everything she’s learned so at least we don’t have to start from scratch.”

“Excellent.”

“She said her first clue that the other five weren’t really scientists was how they keep forgetting to call each other ‘doctor’ and then suddenly remind each other. She doesn’t think they’re the brightest stars in the Tarkanian constellation; they’re there for muscle to keep Yommet in line.”

“Has she seen any evidence of Yommet being out of line? Any hint of needing asylum?”

“I asked her about that, because obviously we’ve had our fair share of that sort of thing and it’s easier when we know it’s coming. She said she doesn’t think so, that it’s more a case of an enthusiastic researcher eager to talk about anything and everything, and a military guard on orders to keep him from saying too much or to the wrong people.”

“Mm,” Picard said with a nod.

“She agrees with you that it’s similar to how Romulans send Tal Shiar out with scientists.”

“Wonderful. Starfleet was hoping we’d get in there with our influence first but perhaps the Romulans have beaten us to it.”

“I don’t think so, based on Rosen’s report. Seems like the Tarkanians might have been like this all along. Hell, maybe the Tal Shiar was based on Romulans learning from the Tarkanians all those centuries ago.”

“Good heavens, Number One, don’t even joke about that. The last thing this quadrant needs is a force even darker and more reticent than the Romulans.”

“Given Rosen’s fairly low opinion of the intelligence of these guards, I don’t think you need to worry too much about that. She

doesn't think they're actually a threat, more that they want to be perceived as a threat while simultaneously acting out this pretence of being scientists." Riker laughed. "She told me they can't even answer basic questions on Yommet's research while they're pretending to be on his team."

"They can pretend all they like while they're on board, as long as they keep their chest-thumping to their own chests."

"She thinks they will. I get the strong feeling her frustration is more about having better things to do than be micromanaged by this nonsense versus actual concern about danger. Oh and I asked her about the rumoured tails."

"And?"

Riker laughed again. "She said everyone keeps looking and the Tarkanians have undoubtedly noticed, so if they do have tails they're hiding them under their long coats. Oh yeah, because the military ones dress all the same, but differently than Yommet. Apparently he dresses in a way that if he had a tail, it'd show."

Picard smiled. "They sound like a fascinating group of characters."

"Yeah. Shouldn't be too hard to cater to them room-wise, and we can easily organise a banquet based on the food preferences Rosen's noted for us."

"Excellent. Thank you, Number One."

Riker rose, passing his leg back over the back of the chair again. "I'll get things underway," he said as he headed for the door.

"I appreciate that."

As the door opened and Riker returned to the bridge, Troi entered and asked, "May I speak with you, sir?"

"Yes of course, if it's brief," Picard said, pointing to the chair.

"Actually what I need to talk to you about will take some time," she said, remaining standing.

"Something wrong?"

Troi gave him an all-too-familiar look, and he knew she was about to insist on discussing something she knew he didn't want to talk about. "We need to talk about Anna White."

“Oh. Why?”

She raised an eyebrow at him and he felt duly scolded. “You know why. I’ve been trying to give you some time and space after all you went through on that mercenary vessel, but at some point we really do need to address this situation. She is on board now, you know.”

“Yes, I am aware of that.”

She finally sat down and asked, “How do you feel about that?”

“I feel as though I have a call with Admiral Chekote in approximately fifteen minutes.”

She blinked at him, and he knew she recognised his deflection for precisely what it was. But she let it slide and asked instead, “Are you checking in with him regarding the Tarkanians?”

“Yes, so as you can imagine, it’s quite important.”

“Indeed. It should also be quite short since you don’t have much to report yet.”

Damn it, I am not up to this game right now, he thought. He wanted to contradict her, but instead merely sighed and adjusted his uniform.

Troi smiled indulgently and suggested, “How about 1700, then? I don’t want to start too late as there really is a great deal of information I’ve been researching and need to share with you.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“It is, and you know that as well as I do. So, 1700 here or in your quarters? Perhaps you’d be more at ease there. Or you could meet me in my office if you’d prefer to think of this as a prelude to family counseling —“

“No,” he said a little too quickly. He knew he was being played and didn’t like it, so he took a deep breath to regain control and then repeated, “No. My quarters will be fine.” *I’m not going to talk her out of this so I’ll concede for now but at least keep it all as private as possible*, he guardedly thought. “My quarters will do.”

“Good,” she said gently. “I really do believe this is important for both of you, even if it turns out you’re not actually related. You still knew her mother and in the absence of any other family, you

may be the closest she has. But it's important for you to understand her needs because from what I've been able to learn so far, she's actually fairly fragile and in real need of support."

"Understood, Counselor."

Troi stood and smiled at him warmly. "It wouldn't hurt for you to have more familial relationships in your own life as well."

He simply stared impassively in reply.

She sighed indulgently at him and left.

On second thought, maybe the cloak and dagger types are right to keep her sort out of their business, he thought. She's too damned good and would make them look the fools.



Stardate 47155.2 (Thursday 26/02/2370, 15:30) — Deck Thirty-Six

The turbolift doors opened down the corridor from main engineering. Data stepped out in mid-speech. "Which is why I am currently interested in comparing the styles of Earth's impressionists with a very similar technique that was very popular in the early days of First-Republic-era Cardassia," he explained. "I have identified forty-three Cardassian artists of that time whose works were..." He stopped speaking as Anna came out of the turbolift behind him and its doors closed.

"What's wrong?" Anna asked, looking around carefully.

Data's brow furrowed for a moment as he realised she had misinterpreted his pause as indicating danger nearby. "Nothing," he replied. "There is no threat. I did not mean to startle you. I stopped because I have an internal timer to alert me when I have been speaking on a single topic for more than five minutes."

Anna's brow furrowed as well. "Why?"

“I am unused to being allowed to speak for more than that amount of time on any given topic without being told to stop, or observing body language indicators that people wish that I would.”

“People actually tell you to stop speaking about interesting things?”

“I believe most humans do not appreciate the level of detail with which I am able to discuss most subjects.”

Anna blinked in surprise. “Oh. Well, I’ve mostly only heard myself talk for over twenty years so I guess I’m just glad to hear someone else talk at all. Please continue,” she said with a warm smile. “I really like listening to you.”

“You do? You are not just being polite?”

“As long as you don’t expect me to know anything about this art stuff, I’m perfectly content to listen to you talk about it. I’m learning so many things from you today. Besides, half the point of the Hamilton musical is that ‘talk less, smile more’ is terrible advice if you want to accomplish anything worthwhile in your life. You can tell me all about art any time and I promise I’ll listen and never tell you to stop.”

She beamed up at him again, and once more he experienced a compulsion to record and measure every visible aspect of the smile. He found himself unexpectedly incorporating this study into his contemplations about facial expressions in fine art, and it occurred to him that he could find great satisfaction in initiating a new art appreciation project centred on depictions of smiles and how they compare to the genuine warmth he noted whenever Anna favoured him with one of hers.

All of this occurred in a fraction of a second, after which he reflected a smile back at her and said, “I would enjoy speaking more about art and any other topic to you at great length whenever we are both available.”

“That would be lovely,” she replied.

“However, for now I believe Geordi is expecting a report on the EPS upgrades.”

“Then let’s go off to see the wizard!” she said with a laugh as they headed down the corridor towards main engineering.

“Geordi is a highly adept engineer, but I do not believe he is capable of magic.”

Anna laughed again and Data noted a particular levity to her steps as they went inside and approached the chief engineer’s corner.

Geordi looked up at them as they approached and burst into his own enormous smile. “There you two are. I can tell from the flow readout that you’ve been busy.”

Anna gleefully rapid-fire reported, “All the EPS conduits in the drive section have been optimised for the incoming new routines and while we were at it we found and repaired four flow regulators that needed re-synching, plus seventeen underperforming bypasses, six mildly corroded valve junctions, two sticking panel latches, a whole row of thermal sensors in need of replacement, and...I just said all of that way too fast, sorry,” she said, slowing her speech on the last few words. “Sometimes I talk too fast.”

Geordi laughed. “It’s fine. I caught the gist: you fixed a bunch of stuff. Thank you.”

Data said, “I heard every word clearly. I would be happy to repeat it to you if you wish.”

Geordi held up a hand. “No, that’s fine, thanks Data.”

Anna shrugged. “I can’t help doing that. I forget I’m talking to actual people sometimes.”

“I often have that problem as well,” Data said. “Although I have a default subroutine regulating my speech, there are times the amount of information I need to relay in a short time overrides those standard parameters.

Anna held out her arms and exclaimed, “Exactly!”

“I have had to supplement my normal speech programming with limiters to prevent such occurrences similar to the time limit I was just telling you about.”

Anna turned to Geordi and said, “He says some people actually want him to stop talking about interesting things!”

Geordi chuckled awkwardly. “Uh, well, sometimes we don’t have time to get...you know...a full report on any random topic.”

Anna looked to Data again to ask, “Does it happen to you that people ask a question and then you answer it fully and they get all cranky because the answer is longer than they expected?”

Data nodded. “Typically they have asked an insufficiently specific question but perceive the answer as being at fault for containing too much information, even if it matched their question precisely.”

Anna bounced on her heels excitedly. “Why, you do understand! I knew you would!”

“Very much so.”

She grinned at them both cheekily, took a deep breath, and then began to recite at great speed, “The power transfer conduits extend from engineering aft where they intercept the warp engine support pylons. Each channel is fabricated from six alternating layers of machined tritanium and transparent aluminium borosilicate which are phase-transition welded to produce a single pressure-resistant structure. The interfaces with the reaction chamber incorporate explosive shear-plane joints that can separate within zero-point-zero-eight seconds in the event of a warp core jettison. Taps for the EPS are located at three places along the PTC at five, ten, and twenty metres aft of the shear-plane joints.”

Data joined in to recite the rest with her, prompting Anna to speed up with Data matching along in unison. “Taps for the EPS are available in three primary types, depending on their application. Type one accepts zero-point-one capacity flow for high-energy systems. Type two accepts zero-point-zero-one input for experimental devices. Type three accepts relatively low-power input for energy conversion applications.”

Geordi sat staring at the two of them, mouth agape, as Anna giddily clapped and bounced.

Data said, “That is the current specification for the Galaxy-class PTC assembly. I am surprised you would wish to recite that, given that the new PTC will incorporate your interphasic design.”

With an enormous grin, Anna replied, “I know, but I still had to know how the old one works. And anyway, I can’t just delete eidetic memories, not even when I come up with new specs.” She clasped her hands together and rapidly recited, “The trellium-C/D interphasic fusion model replaces phase-transition welding so the PTC is constructed as a single piece from the start, reducing the number of potentially fallible weld joints along the system, allowing for more fine-tuned fluctuations in the plasma streams generated at the warp core. This single-piece system is better able to withstand the increased fluctuations to create the asymmetrical peristaltic warp fields in the nacelles by maintaining more of the pressure all the way from intermix chamber to nacelle evenly, thereby lowering peak transitional thresholds and improving overall efficiency.” She then curtsied with her arms wide.

Data nodded appreciatively, and then followed up with another quick recitation of his own. “White’s impromptu research on trellium derivatives began with locating raw trellium exposed on the surface of Covaris Two in an effort to repair the Baltimore’s hull to survive the thermobaric storms that surrounded the planet. With no way to process the ore into trellium-D, however, nor sufficient mining equipment to locate any rare naturally-occurring trellium-D, she had to painstakingly search for even a few trellium-D atoms embedded in the much more commonly found trellium-A. White then used a replicator as a makeshift refinery mechanism to withdraw the D samples and synthesise first a middle hybrid of trellium-C — which was too permeable for use — but she soon developed a replicator-looping technique that generated what she dubbed trellium-C/D, a sufficient insulator for the purposes of passing through thermobaric storms for a limited time. More importantly, however, it was later discovered that trellium-C/D’s unique properties could be utilised in burgeoning interphasic fusion techniques for improved bonding between component layers.”

Anna asked incredulously, “You memorised articles about me?!”

Back to a normal speaking pace, Data replied, “Not specifically, but I am able to recount the essential portions. This fast-speech game is very entertaining.”

“It’s very disturbing,” Geordi said, clearly shocked at how the two of them could spew out so much information so quickly.

But Anna bounced and clapped some more as she declared, “This is the best thing ever!”

Data replied, “That is likely an overstatement.”

“I don’t care! I’m so happy right now! But I bet you can go even faster,” she said with a gleam in her eye.

“Yes. I can speak faster than the human brain can process.”

She made another little squeal of joy and said, “Oh that sounds like a challenge! Try me!”

Data spewed out words at such incredible speed that it was impossible to tell where one word ended and the next began. “High energy plasma created during engine operation is exhausted through a central opening in the sphere to the accelerator’s laser generator. This stage is generally cylindrical three point one meters long and five point eight meters in diameter constructed of an integral single crystal polycrystalline rhenium frame and pyrolytic carbon exhaust accelerator. During propulsion operation the accelerator is active raising the velocity of the plasma and passing it to the third stage the space time driver coils. If the engine is commanded to generate power only the accelerator is shut down and the energy is diverted by the EPS to the ship’s overall power distribution net. Excess exhaust products can be vented non-propulsively. This combined mode of power generation during propulsion allows the exhaust plasma to pass through a portion of the energy is tapped by the MHD system to be sent to the power net.” He abruptly stopped and looked to Anna expectantly, since Geordi had already shaken his head and turned back to his panel.

Anna’s eyes darted from side to side as if she was reading, her fingers flicking as if they were scrolling through the stream of information on a screen before her. Then she smiled at him again and announced, “That’s part of the specs for the impulse drive on a Galaxy class.”

“You are correct. That is very impressive.”

“Okay do another one, even faster!” she gleefully requested.

Data let fly another verbal torrent at a speed he himself would struggle to comprehend if he was not already aware of the source material.

Anna wrinkled her nose, put her hands on her hips, and then shook her head. “No...I don’t think...nope I can’t pull any distinct words out of that. Last time I could sort of capture it and replay it, but that’s too fast.”

“Hm, try this,” Data said, and then made another high-speed recitation.

But this time partway through Anna exclaimed, “That’s ‘My Eyes Are Fully Open’ from *Ruddigore* but it’s also in the first movie version of *Pirates of Penzance* and I love that version so much! I can tell that by the cadence even though the words are a blur!”

Data tilted his head appreciatively. “Intriguing.”

“Isn’t it?! I love this game!”

Data asked, “Is it a game?”

“It is now! Can you do —“

But she was interrupted by Riker coming through on Data’s combadge. “*Data I could use your help planning for the Tarkanian delegation if you’re available.*”

Data tapped his badge. “I will be there momentarily, Commander,” he dutifully replied, then tapped his badge back off. He noted Anna’s sudden scowl and said, “Perhaps we will be able to play another time.”

Her expression softened somewhat. “I’d like that.”

“As would I.” He nodded politely to her and to Geordi — who’d turned back around at Riker’s interruption — and then he left.

Anna sighed and plopped into the chair at the console behind Geordi.

“You know, he’s going to want to calculate the precise parameters of what you can process at what speeds,” Geordi said with a laugh.

Anna’s excitement returned in a flash. “Oh I do hope so!” she exclaimed.

“I meant that as a warning.”

“Warning? This is the most fun I’ve ever had in my whole life!”

Geordi laughed again as he tapped his console to send her a fresh job to tackle for the upcoming drive replacement. “If you say so! Here’s something else for you to chew on while you wait for him to show up again.”

“Ooo! Thank you!” she replied as she plunged into the next challenge.

CHAPTER THREE

Stardate 47155.3 (Thursday 26/02/2370, 16:55) — Picard's Quarters

Picard sat in his armchair in his quarters. On the table before him his tea tray was ready for serving, complete with his favourite set that held the cups nestled comfortably in indentations around the base of the pot. He'd been in two minds about whether he should go ahead with this meeting, but knew Deanna was going to make it happen one way or another eventually. Since she'd said it would take some time to go through the materials she'd collected, he'd decided they may as well both be physically comfortable, at least.

But I am not comfortable, he thought, squirming in his seat like a boy anticipating a scolding. *Why am I so nervous? She's not judging me. She's not going to hold me to account for things I may or may not have done decades ago and even if I did, I had no idea about. So why do I feel as though I've been summoned to the headmaster's office?*

As a diplomat, he was well-schooled in not allowing inner stress to show through obvious external cues, but that meant he'd grown very adept over the years at letting his body experience stress in more hidden ways. Deanna had taught him several techniques on how to combat those concealed tensions, so he took a deep breath and went through his mental list of relaxation exercises. He allowed his jaw to relax, shifted his back to release the locked muscles there, unclenched his toes, and imagined a calming wave passing over him. It didn't completely work — it never did — but between those actions and leaning forward to put his hands on the warm teapot, he was able to calm his thoughts enough to begin to rationalise them.

Why don't I like this? I don't like this because of the uncertainty. I don't like that it's possible I am responsible for someone else's pain. Why am I nervous? I am nervous because...

He sighed again and sat back in the chair, the lingering warmth pleasing on his fingertips. *Because I don't really want to know how bad that pain has been for this poor young woman. I don't want to know the truth of how much all of this has damaged her. It's going to feel like my fault.*

With another deep breath, he nodded at himself in agreement. *That's the crux of it: I am nervous because I am blaming myself and judging myself even if Deanna isn't. If I'm White's father, I owed her a better existence than this, and the excuse of not knowing she existed isn't good enough for me.*

"Which means it's likely not good enough for White either," he muttered aloud.

The door chime sounded, prompting his inner tension to rise again. *None of this is fair to anyone, but what's unfair in this moment is for me to make Deanna have to badger me into any of it. She's merely doing her job, and on top of that she genuinely cares about me and this young woman. I need to stop standing in the way and be more a part of it. I need to grow up and take responsibility for the situation, even if it turns out it isn't my responsibility in a genetic sense.*

With that he called, "Come!" and the door opened.

Troi entered, a warm smile on her face that broadened appreciatively when she saw the tea set on the table. She put a set of PADDs and two isolinear chips down beside the tray and moved around to sit on the sofa in the middle section as she always did; close to him, but not too close.

Picard leaned forward to open the tea box and let her choose her flavour, unsurprised by her usual selection of a floral Yridian variety. He took an Earl Grey bag and poured the hot water for both of them. *Replicated tea is perfectly fine most of the time, but important moments require the ceremony of the real thing, he thought.*

Deanna held her cup in both hands, clearly also appreciative of the warmth. She nodded towards the items she'd placed on the table. "One of those is the standard set of advice and techniques for dealing with familial estrangement. I'd like for you to review that one even if you've read parts of it before, please. Regardless of how this particular situation turns out, we have several crew members on all sides of estrangement issues and it's a very challenging situation to face, as you had to with your father and brother."

"Mm," he replied as he immediately threw up a mental wall against going down that memory path. *One difficult family situation at a time*, he thought.

If she noticed the wall, she didn't challenge it. "Becoming more familiar with some of these coping skills would at the very least enhance your crew leadership abilities, and they may turn out to be useful personally as well."

He put on a small, supportive smile and replied, "Thank you. I promise to read it attentively." He meant it, because there was little point in making an empty promise to an empath.

"Good," she said. She took a sip of her tea, set the cup down on the table, and then assumed what he thought of as her therapist's pose: knees crossed, hands clasped over them. "Now, I'd like to begin by assessing where your head is with all of this at the moment."

He took a sip of his own cup but kept it in his hands, clutching it as a warm comfort. "I find it all to be quite...frustrating. I feel bounced about between wanting it all to just go away one moment and then wanting to plunge in and take full control the next, but caught in so much uncertainty that I can do neither. Am I her father, does she even know it herself, and is she aware that I was completely unaware of her existence until very recently?"

"Those are all valid questions, and it is reasonable to be frustrated at not being able to ask her. Some aspects of this are akin to a diplomatic puzzle, which makes it even more trying for you in particular to be forced to keep on the sidelines."

“Precisely. I understand why she doesn’t want to see me and the last thing I want to do is frighten her or add to her distrust of Starfleet, but I constantly feel the need to engage in some sort of contact to at least ascertain the basic facts.”

Deanna nodded. “Hopefully what I have researched will give you enough information to satisfy some of the peripheral curiosity, at least. It’s good that you want to know more about her.”

He stared at the PADDs and chips on the table and admitted, “I have this churning inner conflict between wanting to find something about her that feels familiar, but I’m also afraid of exactly that.”

“That’s also understandable. It’s entirely natural that part of you is trying to form an attachment to your potential child and seeking those familial traits, but since it’s all so tenuous, anything that shifts the likelihood in either direction is bound to be stressful.”

Picard felt his shoulders relax a little and he leaned back into the chair. “That sums it up exactly, yes.” He sipped his tea again, grateful to be understood so well.

“It’s good that you’re aware of your own mind in all of this, because it’s not clear to what level Anna is aware of hers. Doctor Rundell’s disgraceful conduct has — to be blunt — made a mess of Anna’s entire profile. He only had her in his feral children study group at The Institute for a few months but that was more than enough for him to cause a lot of damage. So many of his theories and diagnoses were so profoundly wrong that all we have to work with is picking through direct records of things she’s said and speaking with people she’s worked with since, none of whom are psychological professionals.” She pointed to the top PADD. “I’ve had to pull some strings to get much of this, but luckily everyone I’ve spoken with has agreed that it’s in Anna’s best interest for me to dig out the facts and try to assemble a better profile for her. Beverly and I were jointly researching this material before your return from the grave —“

He sat back up straight again. “Beverly? Why? I thought we agreed not to involve her!”

She gave him a reproachful look. “No, I didn’t agree to that at all. You decided that and I didn’t argue the point because I intended to try to convince you later of the multiple reasons she should be told. But then you were dead,” she said with the perturbed little smile she always used as a warning that he shouldn’t push her too far on the point. “So I made a different decision than yours in order to best address the needs of the living.”

Picard pressed his lips together and took a deep breath, his grip on the cup tightening.

She continued, “The point is, Beverly and I have been working together to make sense of all of these disjointed bits and pieces. I’ve also spoken with Geordi —“ His eyes and mouth went wide, but she quickly raised a hand and clarified, “Not in any way pertaining to you or Anna’s history, but to check on how she’s doing here on board.”

“Oh. Yes,” he said, calming himself back down. Whatever his role in White’s life was, he wasn’t ready for it to be common knowledge, certainly not before he’d had a chance to sort anything out himself first.

“For what it’s worth, Geordi obviously likes Anna very much both professionally and personally. She apparently has already made a mark in engineering in terms of significant contributions that weren’t even expected of her, and yet he says she doesn’t recognise her own achievements as much as he does. And he said Data’s taken her under his wing. Apparently those two have become fast friends, but I haven’t spoken with Data yet because at this early stage I don’t want to accidentally interfere.”

“Good. Yes. Entirely understandable.” He drank more of the tea to try to calm his nerves.

“My greater immediate concern is when I spoke to Geordi yesterday, he said she was quite upset about something after the events with the mercenary ship, and he and Data couldn’t discern exactly what was wrong. She remained in her quarters until this morning, when Geordi sent me a note that she’d quietly emerged

back into engineering. He suspects her ‘no contact with command’ edict has something to do with either you or Will. I think you and I already know the likely answer to that.”

He sighed. “Indeed.”

“Geordi also said that even though she’s very friendly for the most part, she doesn’t suffer fools gladly.”

Picard reflexively chuckled and said, “Nobody ought to.”

Deanna smiled again. “Somehow I knew you’d like that part.” But then she sighed herself and said, “Unfortunately I’ve also heard from both him and Beverly that Anna had some...social struggles at a party while you were away. My guess is she is trying very hard to be outgoing and personable but lacks the skills necessary to understand certain situations. I could help her navigate these things, but so long as she wishes me to leave her be, I have to respect that.”

Picard put his right hand on the back of his neck to transfer some of the warmth of the tea there. “Well that’s it exactly, isn’t it? Not being able to help is profoundly irritating.”

“Mmhm,” she agreed as she leaned to the table and picked up one of the PADDs and began scrolling through the information there. “But Geordi’s observations match Doctor Cortez’s notes, which I have here for you to read. When Anna is in a good mood and feeling safe, Doctor Cortez says she can be, ‘a blazing genius spewing out brilliance faster than anyone can comprehend unless we record it and go back through again at a slower pace.’”

He knew full well Daystrom personnel were not prone to exaggerate the intellect of their peers, much less contracted specialists. “My goodness, that’s impressive.”

“Her profile is full of praise like that. But Cortez goes on to note that when Anna’s frightened or stressed she retreats into her own living space. She can be coaxed into some situations with a great deal of support, such as attending a social function attached to a conference, but it’s clear that once her tolerance level is reached there’s no further discussion to be had. In particular, Doctor Cortez reports that Anna does not do well with any sort of

aggressive behaviour from men, even if it's not intended to be aggressive. She writes that Anna will 'watch a man she perceives as a threat with such whole body concentration it's like witnessing a prey animal watching a predator, oblivious in that moment to anything else.' Cortez later says Anna's likely to walk off of a cliff or in front of a moving rail shuttle if she's keeping a fixed eye on a man she's afraid of, she's that hyper-focused on a potential threat."

"I suppose that's also understandable, given what she's been through."

"Yes, especially with no apparent support in terms of rape crisis intervention. Rundell..." Deanna gritted her teeth for a moment and Picard could tell she was choosing the gentlest words possible. "That man wrote in his notes that Anna was too feral and dissociated to understand what Loxos did to her. He completely set aside that entire traumatic event in order to study her as what he believed her to be instead of giving her the care she needed for who she really is and what she'd been through."

"That's horrific," he replied as a lump formed in his throat at the thought of the tortures upon tortures White had suffered alone. He was all too aware that the single factor that got him through his own torturous treatment was thinking of his family, his friends, his loved ones. *I cannot even fathom surviving such things believing I was alone in the universe.*

"Mmhm. Anna had to build her own self back up after what she endured, and that's left her very emotionally scarred. Doctor Cortez makes it abundantly clear that Anna has two states: happiness in her technical element, or utter terror at anything she can't control. Again, this matches what Geordi's observed already, that red alerts terrify Anna, even brief ones. He said he intends to work with her on that and give her some training on what to do during a red alert so she can feel more in control of herself at the very least, and his giving her a private lab was an excellent idea that gives her a space to retreat to, but it's clear to me that she's going to need a great deal more support in order to live on a starship again even aside from whatever's going on with you. But

I'm fairly certain her retreat to her quarters in these last few days was most likely precipitated by your return."

"Do you think she's that upset that I turned out to be alive?"

"I would expect her feelings to be complicated on the matter. Beverly and I were very concerned for her when we thought you were dead, but we had no direct way to reach out to her without risking alienating her further. It was an emotional time for everyone. Many members of the crew are still struggling to reconcile their profound grief at your loss with the sudden transition to joy at your return."

Picard nodded. "I have noticed a few desperate expressions. Ensign Wilks took one look at me in the corridor yesterday morning, burst into tears, apologised for it, and then begged to be dismissed even though I hadn't summoned her in the first place."

Deanna picked up her tea, sipped again, and set it back down. "Yes. Without going into personal details, she and some of the other crew — particularly the younger ones — see you in a paternal light and took your death very hard."

"I can understand that. Captain Ruhalter's death on the Stargazer shook me, but I didn't have time in the moment to cope with it. It only really hit me months later, as we've discussed before."

"Exactly. Now imagine an actual paternal figure with whom you are currently in conflict is announced to be deceased, only to have that reversed a short time later. Anna's had a lot to deal with in the short time she's been on this ship, so I'm frankly not surprised she hid herself away for a few days. But coming back out speaks to her resiliency. And to be honest, I have to believe she knows on some level that by being here, she's opened herself up to meeting you at some point."

Deanna set the PADD back on the table, tapping it with her fingertips. "Someone at this level of extreme intelligence has to know by coming aboard there's a chance of an encounter with you, and while she's drawn her very clear line in the sand in front of you, in some sense she's also almost daring you to step over it. She

has such a curious mind. Doctor Cortez notes repeatedly that Anna can sometimes be successfully distracted away from a minor fear by simply putting an enticing puzzle in front of her. As angry and resentful as she likely is to both of her parents for abandoning her — as she almost certainly sees it — I have a hard time believing she isn't curious about you and must want to know you on some level. But children who grow up without love, without security, they turn into adults who struggle with trust and attachment.”

“Hence the boundaries as tests, as you mentioned in that first meeting where Geordi discussed bringing her aboard.”

“Exactly. But we can't know which boundaries are tests and which ones are her legitimate security needs. Unfortunately this puts you in the unenviable position of having to shoulder the burden of risk.”

“You think I should go to her?” he asked with both a glimmer of hope and gut-clenching fear that she'd say yes.

“No, not yet,” she replied, to his disappointment and relief. “Everything is very new and fragile for her right now. If we're very lucky and careful she might come to see the Enterprise as some sort of home. Geordi's left her assignment request open-ended after the installation of the new warp core she's mainly here for, and he's made it clear he'd like to attract her as a long-term member of the engineering team. If she stays, then in the future an opportunity might arise for —“

“First contact?”

“Of a sorts, yes. And you'll need all of your diplomatic skills, but you can't regard her as a diplomatic project.”

“Yes I realise that,” he said, finally setting his cup down as well now that he felt on the cusp of an assignment he could sink his teeth into.

“That's why you need to read what I've put together for you. I've tried to spare you the worst of the unpleasant parts, but I've more or less prepared what I'd prepare for any parent. Some of it is still very difficult to read and view, not just in terms of the terrible things she's been through, but also how she's likely to perceive

you. And again, much of it is conjecture since we're not entirely certain she even knows about you. Despite the appalling nature of Doctor Rundell's observations for the most part, there is indication in his notes that Anna knew more about her living family than she was letting on." She rolled her eyes and added, "Unfortunately he interpreted that as stemming from a pathological source because he clearly always saw her as a feral child with the unusual perk of having communication skills, whereas I believe she's more like the child of an abusive or broken home."

"Abusive? Do you believe her mother harmed her?" he asked, galled at the notion that a woman he'd had a relationship with could wilfully hurt a child.

"There's no specific evidence of that, but there is evidence of neglect. An investigation after Anna returned revealed that those who knew Johanna White — Meredith's mother, with whom Anna and Meredith lived until the launch of the Baltimore — had no idea there was a grandchild in the house at all. Anna was never registered for any type of schooling, daycare, or infant play programs. It might be that she was effectively hidden away."

"From me?"

"Possibly, although it's difficult to tell the precise motivations. What's likely is that Meredith resented whomever the father is and most likely resented Anna in return. Children — even infants — pick up on that. It's likely Anna had a very lonely infancy and toddlerhood, only to then be smuggled aboard a ship not designed to handle children at all, and then to lose all of the adults in her life and have to face a lonely, hostile environment entirely alone other than an unemotional, detached computer as a pseudo-parent. I believe this resulted a situation more akin to being raised by emotionally distant parents in a continually threatening environment, as opposed to being a feral child who had no communications with anyone and had to forage for sustenance. If Doctor Rundell had recognised the clear signs of reactive attachment disorder and the extreme trauma of what Loxos did to her aboard the Carbonaria instead of basing everything on the

presumption that Anna was feral, I believe she would have received the support she needed instead of what amounted to further torture. To be fair, at the time when we was first brought back to Earth Rundell didn't have access to her logs but —“

“She kept logs?” he asked, hoping he might gain access to them to get some of his questions answered.

“Yes, limited ones from when she was ready to launch the ship and then while she was on her way back to Earth.” She smiled again as she recounted, “I've seen them, and I must say, she's extremely charismatic for someone who has been so alone for so long. She's funny and engaging when she's pleased with herself.” Her smile turned wistful again. “But she also openly expresses her despair, and that's very difficult to watch. The logs can be quite intense because she's intense. She doesn't hold back when she's angry about her situation, and it can be...well, painful to hear, to be honest. She's wildly emotional and incredibly adept at describing her emotions to an audience she isn't even sure exists.

“That's what fascinated Rundell, why he grabbed her for his program because he thought she was his missing link, the unique bridge of a feral child who could be made to communicate, someone he could question and get meaningful answers from but remain confined by the diagnosis he'd decided for her. Instead of celebrating her achievements and abilities, he pathologised her and gave himself credit for teaching her to speak clearly. He buried anything that didn't fit the narrative he was desperate to create, including her logs once they were found and the initial reports from the medical staff of the Fleming — the ship that rescued her from the Carbonaria. The Fleming staff reported that she was suffering from trauma-induced, fluctuating catatonic depression, not an inability to speak, but Rundell had that report classified under the pretence of privacy when really he just didn't want to acknowledge it. That's why even aside from his horrendous treatment of her personally, he's been stripped of all research rights and had his previous papers retracted, because he flagrantly broke

every ethical rule in psychological research in his zeal to prove his theories about feral child communication.”

Picard said in a dire tone, “There is no sufficient punishment for people like that.”

“Agreed, but even if there was that wouldn’t help Anna. Captain Avila — the JAG officer Anna managed to contact by hacking through the Starfleet campus system, and who arranged Anna’s eventual emancipation — noted that Anna appeared entirely disinterested in what would happen to Rundell. She just wanted to be freed. She never testified directly at Loxos’ trial — mainly because she was under Rundell’s control at the time and he prevented it, again under the guise of protecting her — and she apparently ignored all invitations to testify or record any statements about Rundell after she was released. It’s tragic that after all her heroic efforts to get back to Earth, once she was free all she wanted was to be left alone.”

“I can’t say I blame her,” Picard admitted sadly.

“No. Neither can I, and that’s part of why we must respect her needs here. Everything about her is so complicated,” Deanna said, reaching for another PADD. “There are hardly any photos of her as a child, even before the Baltimore, which again speaks to possible neglect. We have her official medical ID photo every year until she was four years old, and one photo of her sleeping as a toddler that her grandmother posted to a carer social group with the caption, ‘I think this is the first time this child has slept for more than an hour, so now I’m worried something’s wrong!’ Her mother’s social accounts have no photos of her anywhere, which is deeply unusual.”

“Indeed,” Picard replied, looking at the photo on the PADD Deanna was holding up, hoping to spot a resemblance somewhere to children in his family — perhaps his nephew René — but it was a dimly-lit picture of a small child asleep on a red carpet with a blue and white floral pattern, her face turned away from the imager. She wore a frilled denim dress that had fallen askew over a patterned nappy, her short brown hair was quite unkempt, and she

had what seemed like awfully thin little legs and arms for a child of that age. There was nothing familiar about her in the least.

Deanna continued, “Since the Baltimore’s computer already had a basic childcare module engaged before the crash — the sort that’s usually found on family ships, nobody is certain who installed it on the Baltimore — it attempted to record an annual picture as well.” She swiped to a different screen and laughed at little. “But you can see how well that turned out,” she said as she held it up for him and went through a series of very blurred photos of a child who was clearly unwilling to sit still. One was of the back of her head, and one of the teenage shots featured a very prominent middle finger being held up to the camera.

Deanna tapped one of the photos and said, “I like this one the best.” In it, the little girl’s face was too close to the camera, her tongue out defiantly, but there was also a hint of delighted mischief in her eyes. “Again, Rundell used these to prove her supposedly feral state, but it’s clear to me she knows exactly what she’s saying with these poses.” She returned to the thumbnail display and pointed to the one with the finger. “Especially that one. Don’t tell me that’s not communicating a very strong message.”

“Oh yes, indeed,” Picard agreed. Usually he found such gestures to be crass, but there was something inherently charming about the photo, something wonderfully strong and independent. He found he could not disapprove as much as he normally would.

Deanna explained, “Truly feral children don’t express their anger in language or signs. They bite, kick, scratch, and roar. Based on the information I’ve been able to gather so far, I believe Anna suffers from profound reactive attachment disorder, plus severe complex post traumatic stress and quite likely all of the anxiety, depression, and other issues that tend to go along with that. I believe despite her lack of socialisation she is actually quite adept at picking up social skills, in particular reading the room and reflecting the behaviours she sees in order to fit in and stay safe. I’m quite certain her high intelligence has helped her learn quickly how to pass as perfectly ordinary while actually struggling deeply

with everything going on around her. She's extremely skilled at modifying her environment to suit her needs and for shelter and sustenance and for her mobility requirements, but also aesthetically. This tells me she's always understood that there's value in art, stories, and other people, even if she had insufficient role models for any of that. She found ways to give herself a pseudo-social environment."

She switched to another photo set on the PADD and held it up for him again. This time, they showed a ship's interior covered in childlike paintings with photos of faces hung all around. "These images are from inside the Baltimore," she explained. "Anna painted rainbows and butterflies all over it, clearly at different ages judging by the designs. She put up pictures of women's faces, and one of the Baltimore research team figured out they're all significant Broadway and movie stars from the 1900s. She found ways of socialising and giving herself hope, and though these terrible experiences have clearly left her with many psychological scars, she appears to be an incredibly strong and resilient person."

Picard nodded, hoping to inspect the photos more closely later. He already knew her technical adaptations to the ship were fascinating to engineers, but he was freshly intrigued by these artistic endeavours.

Deanna continued, "To be blunt, I'm fairly certain that if she hadn't been so resilient and intelligent, she'd have died early after the crash, even independent of her leg injury. She has a strength of spirit that's kept her going, but that's not enough for anybody. She desperately needs a supportive social network and I am fully committed to making sure she finds that here, even if I can't work with her directly. And Captain, I am enlisting your assistance with that. Beverly and I are already agreed on this. We need you on board as well."

"Yes," he agreed quickly. "Absolutely. Understood. I want to help." *I want to know this person*, he thought.

“As I said earlier, you may be the closest thing to family this uniquely gifted and uniquely traumatised young woman has, biologically or not.”

“What about Meredith’s family?”

“There isn’t anyone left. Meredith was an only child and both of her parents are deceased, as are her grandparents. There are no cousins within several generations.”

He couldn’t take his eyes off of one photo in particular of an enormous rainbow painted across several segments of corridor with multicoloured handprints underneath. It reminded him of the Captain Picard Day banner he had grown to love over the years, even if he still vocally protested the day itself. It broke his heart to think of how lonely a child must have been to have only her own prints to look at, and he found himself struggling not to shed tears for her.

Deanna gently said, “Captain, I understand this is difficult for you, but it’s important.”

Picard collected himself and replied, “Yes, yes, of course. I know.”

“I am entirely certain the day will come when she reaches out to you, and you need to be prepared. You wouldn’t go into a diplomatic mission without scouring the briefing for any hint as to how to connect to the people involved. This may be your most personally significant diplomatic mission. When the day comes that she decides to step into your life, it’s essential that you understand all of this,” she said, putting the PADD down on top of the others and nudging the stack towards him. “You may only get one opportunity to give her the warm, safe welcome she needs. If you fail to understand her in that moment when it comes, you could truly lose her forever. All of us could. The stakes with someone this profoundly in need are very high.”

“Yes, I meant what I said. I do want to help, difficult though it all is.”

She nodded. “Good. I’m quite certain that if Loxos hadn’t gotten to her first and then Rundell, she might have come back to earth tentatively seeking out what family she had.”

“But instead she’s learned to fear everybody who approaches,” he said with sad resignation.

“Yes. So, let’s let her get comfortable here. Ensure her boundaries are respected.”

“Give her time to let down her guard on her own terms,” he suggested, trying to sound hopeful for himself as much as for Deanna to hear.

“Precisely. I expect it might take months or —“

“Months!” he exclaimed.

“Yes, Captain. Or even longer. Reaching out to someone who has turned their trauma into a habitually defensive lifestyle is going to be a long-term project. But I am hopeful that, with time and patience, she’ll become more receptive to at least being in the same room with you. And then, if it should turn out that our initial assumption that you’re her father is wrong, then there’s no harm done in having given her space. But in that time, you’ll have to cope with your own feelings about all of it.”

Picard sighed. *This is exhausting*, he thought. *Months of it may be untenable*. But he nodded resolutely and said, “I know. I will work on it.”

“We’re going to be talking about this a lot, you and I,” Deanna said kindly but firmly.

“Of that I have no doubt.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Stardate 47155.5 (Thursday 26/02/2370, 18:00) — Main Engineering

Anna knew she probably ought to take a break to get some dinner, but the confounding little problem Geordi had handed her was too delicious in and of itself for her to leave for something as mundane as literal food. It wasn't a crucial issue, but it was one of those technical little oddities that had irritated her with the Baltimore's drive and then in every iteration of warp fields she'd worked on with Doctor Cortez and other researchers since. Workarounds had always been sufficient so nobody ever got around to solving the issue; procedure was to simply employ the workarounds to prevent subspace anomaly proliferation rather than tackle the actual core issue of warp bubble friction, as she liked to think of it. Precise calibrations were considered good enough, but seeing that Geordi had been tinkering around with it as well reignited Anna's desire to fix what she considered to be a lingering, irksome bug.

It wasn't that the anomalies were harmful in any way she was aware of, it was simply that it felt like littering; it seemed rude to go through space dropping anomalies and not caring what might happen later as a result.

The calculations Geordi had given her were much further along than anything she'd seen before, and that excited her. Coming off of the joy of her new game with Data, she was in an extremely good mood as she danced back and forth between the console at the rear of the chief engineer's corner and the central master systems display table to compare wildly experimental readouts in a secure test bed.

Anna didn't even realise she was humming to herself until someone behind her said, "I've always loved that song."

Startled out of her reverie, she turned to see Lieutenant Aisling Navarro standing at one of the side panels, entering information into the overall engineering task log. “Sorry?” Anna asked, once again somewhat confused by reality when her head had been out in subspace.

“You were humming ‘Lullaby of Broadway’”, Aisling replied. “It’s a family favourite for us. My husband and I have done both foxtrot and quickstep routines to it, and I sing it to my daughter as an actual lullaby.” She laughed a little and softly sang, “*Goodnight, baby, goodnight, milkman’s on his way!*”

Anna joined in on the last few words and then they both laughed together. “I wish someone had sung that to me as a lullaby!” She turned her head to the side and frowned at the floor. “Not sure anyone ever sang any lullaby to me, to be honest.” But then she smiled again at the tall, slim, blonde engineer and said, “Anyway, I bet you dance really nicely to it. Data told me you and your husband do competitive dancing. That’s very exciting!”

Aisling chuckled. “We used to. Haven’t had much chance since Aoife was born. Now we just dance casually in the holodeck when we need a date night. Not that you get many of those with conflicting schedules and a little kid to worry about!”

“Oh, I suppose not.”

Aisling stretched out her arms elegantly and performed a twirl, tricorder still in hand. “We’d have to get in much better shape than this if we wanted to go back to competition.”

Anna’s eyes and mouth went wide. “Why, that’s lovely! I wish I could move like that! I’ve always wished that!”

“You’re sweet. I’ll trade you some dance lessons if you teach me how you hacked that campus comm network to get a message to the JAG office,” she said casually as she turned back to the side panel.

Anna took a reflexive step backwards, her hands suddenly twisting nervously before her.

Aisling glanced over her shoulder, noticed Anna’s unhappy posture, and then immediately said, “Oh! Oh no! I’m sorry, I didn’t

mean it like that! I...oh shit we're not supposed to ask you about that stuff and I promise I didn't mean to upset you! I just..." She sighed and her own shoulders slumped. "I'm exhausted and my mouth ran faster than my brain could stop. I'm really sorry. It's just that I'm part engineering, part security, so that kind of thing is really fascinating to me. I mean fascinating in a technical sense, not that you going through awful things is fascinating, I mean...oh damn it. I'm sorry."

Despite the initial startle of having had her escape from The Institute brought up, Anna believed that Aisling hadn't intended to offend her, and she felt guilty for the way the conversation had turned. She took a deep breath and said, "It's okay."

"No, it isn't," Aisling said, setting the tricorder down on the central console and taking a tentative step closer. "Geordi told us not to ask you about your past and I didn't even think of it in that context as I was saying it. It was pure technical curiosity, I swear."

Anna nodded. "I can understand that." Then she shrugged and added, "I can also understand asking about a tech thing before thinking about it first. I've gotten into trouble a few times for doing that, just blurting out a question that turns out to undermine someone's whole work."

Aisling grimaced. "Oh, I bet they didn't like that."

Anna shook her head. "Apparently it's rude to accidentally question someone's theories in front of them."

"It shouldn't be, but...yeah, I can see that."

"Anyway I promise I have no intention of doing any hacking of the comms on board here. You don't have to worry about me from a security perspective."

Aisling's eyes went wide with renewed concern. "Oh no! I didn't mean it like that either! I completely understand why you did it. Ethically, morally, and in all manner of decency I understand! It's how you did it that I'm curious about. You had to go through some of the toughest communications protocols to get out of one system and into another and drop files right in front of a senior JAG officer. That's...well it's fantastic! It's amazing! And I

desperately want to know how you did it, not because I'm judging you at all. It's like...well..."

"A puzzle to solve?"

"Exactly! Wait, no! Oh shit, I just keep digging deeper, don't I? Your life, your story isn't a puzzle."

Anna was confused. "I didn't think you meant it unkindly."

Aisling let out another sigh of relief. "Good. I didn't. I feel like I'm messing this whole conversation up really badly."

"I know that feeling too. It's okay. I'm a bit freaked out but I also know you aren't trying to make me freak out. It's all just so...freaky."

"Thank you. You're being really nice about this."

Anna shrugged again. "Anyway I did tell Captain Avila the gist of it when she let me out."

"Yes, and pretty much everyone in Starfleet security saw that report."

Anna made a grimace of her own. "I figured that'd get around. That's why I didn't tell her everything."

"I don't blame you. After everything you'd been through, well if it was me I'd want to make sure I didn't hand them all my escape routes either."

"Something like that," Anna said awkwardly.

"Not that I'm saying you'd do it again, more like I wouldn't blame any innocent person for wanting to escape. I'd hope that doesn't happen very often, but obviously..." she held out her hands towards Anna as an acknowledgement.

"I'm pretty sure many of the staff at The Institute had no idea they were helping to keep innocent people held against their will."

Aisling shuddered and nodded. "It's a really scary prospect for those of us in security. How do we find a balance between wanting to lock up the truly terrible and dangerous people, or protect vulnerable people who can't care for themselves, or maintain system-wide security against external threats, all while preserving the liberties of the innocent and responsible adults entitled to their freedom? Even as a mother of an exhaustingly precocious, lock-

picking child, how do I keep her safe and where she needs to be without being her dungeon keeper? How do we make sure there aren't injustices done to people like you in the first place but also make sure justice is done to the real bad guys?"

Anna suppressed her own shudder as she said, "I for one would like certain bad guys to be definitely locked up forever with no chance of escape."

The implication dawned on Aisling. "Oh shit, that too. I'm just pushing all your buttons tonight and I really, really don't mean to. I'm so sorry. But that's exactly the sort of person I mean. I want impenetrable security to keep that kind of man out of the population for the rest of his life, but I don't want rigid systems that drag in the innocent as well."

"Yeah. That'd be good."

"I suppose it sounds strange, but this is the sort of thing I lie awake at night thinking about."

Anna smiled nervously. "Not that strange. I lie awake at night thinking about warp bubbles."

Aisling laughed a little. "I don't doubt that. I'm sorry about all of this, though. I'll give you dance lessons sometime if you want without any need to answer my questions about security stuff."

Anna thought about the whole conversation, and how if not for her troubled past lingering like an ugly, dark little cloud over her head, this could otherwise be the start of another friendship. She decided she liked that notion enough to reply, "I don't think I can ever dance with this funny leg, but maybe sometime I'll feel like telling you more of how I did what I did. But I need to think about how much I want to say first."

Aisling quickly clarified, "You don't have to. I shouldn't have asked."

"I know I don't. But maybe some of it is okay to...you know...kind of brag about? I mean you're right, I broke through things that should have been harder to break through. Maybe it'd be nice to share a bit more of the how, now that I feel a bit safer in general." She thought, *Because Data and Geordi wouldn't let*

anybody lock me up on this ship without good reason. Not even...the Captain. I think. I hope.

“How about this,” Aisling offered. “If you ever want to talk about any of that stuff with someone who will understand both technically and on the moral level of it all, I’m here with open ears. But I’ll never ask for more than you’re willing to give, I promise.”

Anna nodded. “That sounds kind of nice, actually. Like I said, I’ll consider it. I think for now, though, I’m going to go find some dinner or something.”

“Okay. Sorry again.”

“It’s okay,” Anna repeated as she tapped out of the test bed. She meant it in terms of forgiving Aisling’s unintended provocation of unpleasant memories, but she was lying in terms of how she actually felt and what she was going to do next. Her stomach was in knots and she had no intention of trying to eat. Instead, she smiled and nodded politely on her way to the vertical Jefferies tube, then scrambled up it as fast as she could to hurry into her quarters and curl up on her couch, trying desperately to keep those memories at bay.



Stardate 47155.9 (Thursday 26/02/2370, 21:45) — Picard’s Quarters

As promised, Picard had dutifully started reading Troi’s information on estrangement while he ate dinner, but partway through he allowed himself to become distracted and switched to reading communications and documents in preparation for their visit to Deep Space Four in the morning. Being under orders to make it short and speedy necessitated having everything at the ready, so he decided it was prudent to set aside the more personal matters for another day.

But as he settled into his evening routine, the blue isolinear chip on the table kept catching his eye. Deanna had said that was the one with White's logs on it, and the temptation to have a peek grew every time he walked past until finally he stood over it, hands on hips, and muttered, "Are you a delightful idea or a terrible one?"

The chip did not reply, regardless of Picard's authoritative stare.

Eventually he rolled his eyes, sighed, picked it up, and went to the terminal on his desk. But even there, he turned it over in his fingers several times before finally deciding to plug it in and bring up the first entry.

Instead of the usual format of someone sitting in front of a console, this log erupted chaotically onto his screen with the noise and blurred images of someone trying to operate an imager who clearly had no idea what they were doing.

After a series of unpleasant scratching sounds, a young woman's voice asked, "Is it on now? It looks on, I think? Hang on." Then there was more wild motion followed by laughter. "Okay, I see the feed in the monitor so it's working. Okay. Um, hello? This is very strange. Why, I haven't spoken to anybody in so long! I don't know how that works anymore because all I talk to is the computer. I wonder if anyone will ever see this?"

The imager was swung around again, this time stopping in front of her face. She giggled, wrinkled her nose, and regarded her own image with amusement for a moment. Then she seemed to recall there was a point to her efforts and suddenly let fly a rapid deluge of words that Picard had to fully concentrate on in order to understand.

"Right! A log! I've been going through Starfleet procedure manuals because better late than never I suppose and I found a thing that said captains of ships are required to keep logs and I also found a thing that said whoever runs the bridge may be considered a de-facto captain which would be me so I get to be a captain now and all my Aunties here agree that I am the captain now so I have to keep a log except I don't know how to do that so I hope this is okay."

She took a deep breath and Picard did likewise, thinking, *I see what Doctor Cortez meant about having to replay White's babble to comprehend it.*

He'd scarcely finished the thought when she was at it again. "When I've looked at some other logs that I was not supposed to see so whoops forget I said that part maybe I can edit this later I don't know but anyway they all started with saying the stardate so that is..." She looked at something to the side and read off, "44327.5 so I'm kind of late with this because that's April thirtieth 2367 and I really wanted to be off this planet before I turned twenty but in just over fifteen days I'm turning twenty-two which isn't great but again better late than never unless it's never because I might blow myself up but hopefully that isn't going to happen because the reason this has taken so long is because I've been really really careful about everything down to the last bit of everything and everything should be okay and now I'm saying everything a lot and talking to people is hard Jiminy Crickets I'm bad at this."

After another deep breath she continued, "Okay but I'm going to show you what I've done and hope that I don't get in trouble because it's not like I had a lot of choice with the Baltimore's nose all smashed in so here," she said, rotating the imager around what looked like the interior of a shuttle pod with both side panels open. "I've mounted the shuttlepod to the shuttlebay in what was the aft of the Baltimore to convert the aft to the fore so I can use the shuttlepod's perfectly intact systems to control the Baltimore's warp core."

She then left the shuttlepod to quickly move the imager around the bay, showing that it had been significantly converted to function as a makeshift bridge. "Obviously a Type 15 doesn't have warp so I've had to rebuild a lot of this stuff from replicated parts and my own designs because the Baltimore's drive has been functional all this time but the original bridge is...gone."

She stopped suddenly, and he could hear her panting nervously. “Um...I couldn’t...there’s not really anything left of...okay hang on.”

The scene abruptly changed, as if she’d paused the recording and moved to a different position in the room with the imager facing her once again. Picard noticed that her unruly hair was hanging at an odd level, in a way that suggested she was not upright relative to the planet’s gravity. “Okay, sorry, we’re not talking about the old bridge because it doesn’t matter. It’s...gone. Okay. I’m okay.” She forced another smile and began speaking rapidly again, moving about the bay enough for him to realise the shuttlepod was pointed upwards because the nose of the Baltimore was pointing down, which made sense with her description of the fore of the ship being destroyed.

Good heavens, she’s been living in an upturned ship this whole time, he thought, missing her next fast-paced chatter entirely. By the time his mind re-engaged with her word stream, she was going on about something called “trellium C/D” and using it to bolster the ship against the thermobaric storms that surrounded the planet. He recalled in La Forge’s original briefing about White that the assumed cause of the Baltimore’s crash was due to those storms, and that subsequent investigations by the Yosemite had determined said storms made it too dangerous to attempt to retrieve the ship and crew’s remains, which is how White was accidentally left there alone in the first place.

But in recalling these things he was once again missing what she was saying. He found it inordinately difficult to catch up with her run-on patter until she interrupted herself to talk about having extended the shuttlepod’s shields around this re-designated front of the ship. “So instead of the usual functionalised surface with PVP I’ve utilised my replicator-enhanced trellium C/D to reduce the need for the precise emitter alignment to avoid the obvious naturally explosive force that would come from trying to energise a bunch of magnetite in that way so that let me adjust the emitters to the wider range of field and I just convinced the computer that the

field was supposed to be that big all along even though obviously it wasn't but the computer doesn't seem to recognise when I lie to it because —“ She leaned in close to whisper, “It's not that bright, really.” She grinned mischievously and made a show of casting an apologetic glance towards one of the terminals.

“Anyway,” she continued, “the resulting field isn't as capable of dispersing high-energy bursts from a weapons or other explosive forces of course but it's more than good enough to function as a level one, two, or even three force field if not extended too far and I've been careful not to push it too far which means it's good enough in combination with the hull to maintain life support and all of that which is good because I really don't want to die up there in the cold. I've also been running lots and lots and lots of simulations and I'm reasonably certain it'll hold up for the rough launch I'm expecting because I had to learn all about hull welding techniques because I'm anticipating pretty heavy turbulence on liftoff on account of the inertial dampeners being...well...mostly kind of still broken, actually. I'm pretty sure I can go to warp without being splattered like a jam sandwich against the back wall but I have to ease into it and if those storms are still bad the whole ship and I are going to get tossed around like Dorothy in the twister until we pass through.”

She pointed the imager at what should have been the floor of the shuttlebay but was instead an up-ended wall. The docking clamps were in place but welded over, and she moved the imager to show multiple welds around the room as she said, “I know my welds are ugly but I'm pretty sure they'll hold. Oh and of course I have the all-important rainbows!” she shouted with childlike joy as she held the imager to show a rainbow she'd painted across the front window of the shuttlepod. “I'm finally going over the rainbow!” she exclaimed with an excited giggle.

She turned the imager to herself once more and grinned with pride. “But here! Let me show you my engine room!”

Picard's stomach leapt into his chest as she plunged off of the pod and grabbed ahold of a length of blue cloth hanging down

through the corridors and open doors of the Baltimore. He recognised the older style of corridor walls but viewing them upended while she slid down the cloth was incredibly disorienting, as if he was watching someone fly sideways through a ship at ridiculous speed.

She landed deftly in another room, swinging around on another set of cloth ropes to end up beside the small Aerie-class warp drive, glowing and thrumming as if this entire situation was normal operating procedure. She gleefully twirled with the imager in hand, making his head swim, but just as he was considering turning the video off she burst into song, her rich, contralto voice clear and bright with perfect pitch as if she was a trained performer. *“Look at this stuff, isn’t it neat?”* she sang. *“Wouldn’t you think my collection’s complete? Wouldn’t you think I’m the girl, the girl who has everything?”*

She grinned into the imager again, then turned it to pass it slowly over the whole warp drive from the matter injector housing on the right over to the anti-matter housing on the left as she continued to sing. *“Look at this core, warp bubbles untold! How many wonders can one section hold? Looking around here you’d think, ‘Sure, she’s got everything!’”*

With another sudden turn, the imager was directed at a readout of her fuel storage and dilithium supply. *“I’ve got dilithium and deuterium a-plenty,”* she sang. Another abrupt turn and he could see the drive’s power transfer conduit going up through the wall above her. *“I’ve got conduits and injectors galore!”*

Once again she turned the imager to herself and cheekily sang, *“You want spare manifolds? I’ve got twenty! But who cares? No big deal. I want more!”* she belted out, clipping the imager to her back and — judging by the chaotic shaking and movement upwards — climbed back up the strips of cloth to return to the makeshift bridge. Once she was back in the pilot seat, she set the imager on the front panel and began to spin in the chair.

“I want to be where the people are. I want to see, want to see them dancing! Walking around on those — what do you call them?”

Oh, feet!” She laughed again, twisted herself in the chair, and kicked one bare foot in the air while wagging the stump of her right leg beside.

Picard gasped and put his hand over his mouth. He’d known about the injury from when he’d first learned about her at all, but seeing it was an unpleasant shock.

But White kept merrily singing as if an amputated leg was entirely normal, and Picard realised that to her by that point, it must have been. And yet her next lyrics indicated she knew she was missing out on something. *“Flippin’ your fin, you don’t get too far. Legs are required for jumping, dancing, strolling along down the — what’s that word again? Street!”*

She twisted back around to be sitting properly in the chair and belted out a completely different tune. *“Streetlights, people! Livin’ just to find emotion! Hidin’ somewhere in the night!”* She held that last note impressively long, her mouth wide and Picard’s jaw dropped in bewilderment at her natural talent.

Then she spoke again. “Auntie Barbra says people who need people are the luckiest people in the world and I really need other people again. I forget what real people are like.” She leaned in close to the imager as if she was trying to see through it. “What are you like? Who are you out there?”

She turned away from the camera and Picard couldn’t tell if she was sad or confused — or possibly both — but before he could figure it out she switched modes again and began singing yet another new tune. *“Because for the first time in forever there’ll be music, there’ll be light! For the first time in forever I’ll be dancing through the night!”* She threw her arms open wide, but then suddenly withdrew into herself, wagging her finger at the imager as she warned, *“Don’t let them in, don’t let them see! Be the good girl I always have to be! Conceal, don’t feel, put on a show! Make one wrong move and nobody will know.”*

Returning to speaking she explained, “If I mess this up, will anyone even find what’s left of me and the ship? Way out here?”

Nobody's bothered to come by all these years. If I explode, that's it. I'm just...gone."

Picard shuddered.

She sighed and said desperately, "Okay but I can't stay here anymore. I just can't. Here, come look," she said as she once again left the shuttlepod to swing herself over to a hatch on the side of the bay. She opened it and stuck her upper half out, rotating the imager to show a panorama of a desolate, desert landscape outside. Gold and tan coloured rocks and sand made up most of what could be seen, with small, scrubby-looking bushes dotted around. The sky pulsed with a metallic sheen, waves of contrasting blue and gold as the storms raged in the upper atmosphere, allowing the blaring sunlight through and then trapping the heat on the planet's surface. None of it looked particularly hospitable.

As she turned the imager back towards herself she emphatically declared, "I have to try. I have to get out of here."

Picard keenly felt the desperation in her words and expression. He wanted to encourage her somehow, to applaud her bravery and determination, even knowing all of this was in the past and she'd already succeeded. It wounded him to know that she'd had to bolster herself, that nobody had ever given her even the slightest praise or reassurance along the way.

She turned the imager back to the horizon in the distance and began to sing once more, this time a song he actually knew from *The Man of La Mancha*, one that stirred his heart so much that he had to resist joining in.

"Oh thou bleak and unbearable world, thou art base and debauched as can be," she sang with full heart and might. "And a knight with her banners all bravely unfurled now hurls down her gauntlet to thee! I am I, Anna White, the Girl of the Baltimore! My destiny calls and I go! And the wild warps of fortune will carry me onward, oh whithersoever they blow. Whithersoever they blow! Onward to glory I go!"

"Oh yes indeed," he said with deep admiration as she went back inside, closed the hatch, and pointed the imager at the navigation

screen she'd set up in the bay. The course was already laid in for Sol.

She sang another song from that musical he adored so much, her notes so pure that he felt as if he was watching a fictional film and not a log at all, wondering how this magical creature could make all of these amazing things happen.

"This is my quest, to follow that star," she sang and he could not help but softly hum along. *"No matter how hopeless, no matter how far! To fight for the right without question or pause, to be willing to march into hell for that heavenly cause!"*

Picard burst into a smile at the song, but it faded as she returned to the pilot seat in the shuttlepod, once again putting the imager on the console facing her. She sang again, softly this time, and he thought perhaps it was the same tune she'd started with, but he was so dizzy with all of the motion and emphatic performances that he wasn't sure what was what anymore.

"What would I give if I could live near actual waters? What would I pay to spend a day away from this sand? Betcha on Earth they understand." She leaned forward to sing directly into the imager, the next words piercing into his heart like an arrow. *"Bet they don't forget about their daughters."*

He had to look away, though her glare was nonetheless palpable through the screen.

"Bright young women, sick of waiting, ready to stand! I'm ready to know what the people know, ask them my questions and get some answers! What does rain feel like and what about snow? When do I get to know? Wouldn't I love, love to explore that shore up above? Out of this place, I'll blast into space, to return to that world."

An eerie hush followed the echo of her last note. He turned back to the screen to see her looking away, and when she wiped a tear from her eye he found he had to do likewise.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I can do this. Okay? I can. I have to. All of these years, all of this work," she said,

pointing both hands around the shuttlepod and room beyond. “It’s got to work, right?”

Softly, slowly, and with much melancholy she sang, “*Did you think I’d crumble? Did you think I’d lay down and die? Oh no, not I. I will survive. Oh, as long as I know how to breathe, I know I’ll stay alive. I’ve got all my life to live and I’ve got all my life to give and I’ll survive. I will survive. Hey, hey,*” she trailed off with the last note into a resolute sigh.

“I’m launching tomorrow, no matter what. *Tomorrow, tomorrow, I’m launching, tomorrow. A whole new world’s only a day away.*”

With that, she leaned forward towards the imager one more time and ended the video.

Picard let out a ragged breath, shaken to his core. He put his forehead in his hands, his elbows on the desk, and tried to steady himself. *Deanna warned me some of this would be difficult but I was not prepared for this. I was not prepared for...any of it.*

He closed his eyes and heard her words ringing in his ears, the tunes sticking in his mind, looping over each other in a battle to dominate as an earworm yet all of them weirdly blending together. He felt as though he’d just sat through an entire staged musical crammed into ten minutes and fifty-three seconds: enormous, loud, and all-encompassing. Yet the comparison was insufficient because he’d never experienced any performance of that emotional intensity before, not even in the greatest operas he’d been honoured to attend. He was exhausted yet alert throughout his whole body, electric through to his fingertips and toes, on fire with her enthusiasm and burned by her accusations.

Part of him wanted to watch it over and over, and another part never wanted to see it again. Segments replayed in his mind and he couldn’t shake them; he knew he wouldn’t be able to for days or even longer. He knew he’d dream her face, her laughter and despair, her disorienting movements through the upturned ship.

Yet in his overwhelmed state, something tickled at his mind. The scenes of her laughing kept rising above the rest of the

cacophony to dominate his attention. There was something about her laughter that was familiar to him, but he couldn't place it. He tried to recall the details, but had to give in and put the video back on, skipping through to find the part where she laughed just before turning over in the seat to put her foot and stump in the air. He froze the screen on her laughing face and stared at it, feeling that he knew her from somewhere even though the only other pictures he'd seen were her very unhappy-looking official Starfleet ID photo on her profile and the childhood ones Deanna had shown him earlier.

After a short time of staring and trying to make sense of the eerie familiarity, he got up and fetched his family photo album, intending to go through the copies he had of the ancient family portraits his father used to make him and Robert study. But as so often happened with the album, when he set it down open on the desk it naturally fell open to the page of his parents' wedding photos.

Picard gasped and fell back into his chair.

Breathless, he held the album up alongside his terminal screen, looking back and forth between a picture of his mother laughing and the paused image in the video.

"Computer," he managed to say, his voice shaking. "Flip video image on a horizontal axis."

The computer chirped obligingly, and he nearly cried out when he saw that Anna White's laughing face matched that of his mother precisely. Every line, every curve, even their hair and eye colour, though White's was a chaotic mess while his mother had every bit pinned precisely in place.

"Oh Maman, what have I done?" he whispered in abject shame, tears rolling out of his eyes to know for absolute certain in that moment and forever beyond that this was the face of his daughter, his child, lost amongst the stars and believing herself forgotten and unwanted.

CHAPTER FIVE

Stardate 47157.4 (Friday 27/02/2370, 10:45) — Bridge

Picard had deliberately arrived early on the bridge so he could hide himself away in his ready room before Troi was around to sense his dark mood. He'd slept terribly, wracked with guilt and a desperate need to go down to Deck Thirty-One and make things right, yet knowing he couldn't. Instead, he sought to focus on his work and avoid discussing personal matters in advance of arriving at Deep Space Four.

He remained in his ready room until a few minutes before their scheduled arrival time, at which point he marched officiously out to the bridge and took his seat there, not even looking at anybody else.

“Status report?” he asked formally.

“We will arrive at Deep Space Four on time in four minutes and twenty-seven seconds, sir,” Data replied from the ops station ahead of him.

“Very good.”

“We'll be docking to expedite physical goods exchange,” Riker reported. “The limited crew who are going aboard are standing by.”

“Excellent.”

“I assume you still want to meet with Rosen in person?” Riker asked.

“Yes, Number One. We'll make contact on screen first and then I'll transport over to stay out of the exchange crew's way.”

The Enterprise came out of warp and expertly docked with the station. Once the virtual pleasantries were out of the way Picard rose from his chair, told Riker he had the bridge, and attempted to stride past Troi without a word. But she caught the corner of his eye as he passed, and he could tell she was fully aware of his

mood. As he entered the turbolift, he was glad she knew well enough not to try to tag along and ask him about it.

As was often the case, the mere act of going to the transporter room and taking a place on the glowing pad was enough to force his mind to shift into a professional mode and set his personal issues aside. By the time he materialised outside the main operations area of the station, he was once again the unshakeable Captain of the Enterprise, not a mere man struggling with difficult family circumstances.

“Welcome to Deep Space Four, Captain!” the smiling Commander Rosen greeted, extending a hand.

“Thank you Commander,” Picard replied, taking her hand and shaking it warmly.

“Tea in my office?” she offered.

“That would be lovely, thank you,” he said, following her through a standard Starfleet operations centre and into a small but comfortably appointed room, where he happily sat and graciously accepted a perfect cup without even having to specify the type. “You’ve done your research,” he said appreciatively.

Rosen laughed. “I don’t think there’s anyone in Starfleet who doesn’t know how to cater to Captain Picard at this point. Besides, you’re doing me a huge favour so the least I can do is make you comfortable while you blaze on through.”

“Oh? Dare I ask if this favour has to do with the Tarkanians?”

“You are still taking them with you, aren’t you?” she asked, slightly concerned.

“Indeed we are. Are they that much trouble to you?”

Rosen sighed and leaned her head on her right hand, elbow on the desk, letting her dark hair fall through her pale fingers. “You know, most Deep Space station commanders get this assignment for a lot of bad reasons. We tend to be the ones the admirals trust to get a static job done but not trust enough to be unleashed on the quadrant. Most see it as a stepping stone to something else, something better. But me?” She laughed and sat upright, then

leaned forward as if she was letting him in on a secret. “I chose this. I asked for this. Practically begged for it. You know why?”

“Do tell.”

“Because it’s supposed to be dull. It’s supposed to be routine. Not necessarily easy,” she said, raising both hands and leaning back once more. “But barring having to pass on warning of an incoming invasion fleet — which would be a pretty short task since any decent fleet would make mincemeat of us — deep space assignment is about watching, waiting, a bit of diplomacy here and there, a bit of settling trade disputes, and just letting the days roll by. And I like it that way.”

“There are certainly times I can understand the appeal of that,” Picard replied.

“Liar. You’re one of those swashbuckling, high seas adventure types.”

Picard laughed. “All right, fair enough. I’d detest the assignment you describe.”

“Damned right you would. And that’s fine by me. You go lead the next battle. I’m done with that.” Her expression suddenly became very serious. “I was there, you know. At Wolf 359. First officer on the Ahwahnee, and one of the few survivors aboard.”

“Yes, I know,” Picard said calmly.

“Some of my colleagues came out of that eager for their next fight. Not me. That did it for me. My battle days are done.” Rosen looked suddenly concerned. “I’m sorry, does it bother you to talk about it? My head was in knots for a full year at least.”

“It was an awful encounter, but I’m fine now,” he lied as easily as always when the subject came up.

Rosen shook her head in sympathy. “You suffered more than anyone, I think, and I know there are others in my position who blame you. I’m not one of them. Never have been.”

“Thank you. That is very gracious of you.”

Rosen chuckled. “Damn, Picard, you are a smooth diplomat, aren’t you? Well good, you be that and I’ll be me and we’ll both be happy, if any of us knows what happiness looks like anymore. I

was content with my boring station until the Tarkanians decided it was time to break centuries of silence and come sniffing around our edges. Now I'm caught up in a diplomatic mission with a bunch of aggravating shit-stirrers. Please get these people off my station and let me go back to the dull procedures that would drive you up the wall."

"Are they really that awful? My first officer mentioned a series of needs-adjustments but —"

Rosen threw her head back and laughed. "Yeah, that's Federation talk for 'annoying assholes' but okay, let's go with that. Needs-adjustments. You cannot adjust enough for their needs. I honestly don't know if they're intentionally aggravating or that's just in their nature. My security chief is convinced it's all a ruse to hide the fact that they're up to something, but for the life of me I can't figure out what they could possibly be up to that's worth that much kvetching." She shook her head again. "Frankly I don't think they're bright enough to pull anything. Maybe Yommet, but his guards?" She scoffed. "They're like a bad comedy troupe, bumbling about pretending to be scientists when they haven't got a clue."

"Well, we're quite used to difficult ambassadorial sorts on the Enterprise. I'm confident we can take them off your hands and keep them reasonably satisfied for the fifteen day trip to Starbase 718."

"Good. Thank you. Get them off my station and I will sing your praises for a solid month, at least."



At the same time back on the ship, Anna was singing along to her Broadway show tunes playlist in her lab while experimenting with the physical properties of several low-friction materials in an effort to keep busy and forget about the social stress of the previous day.

Some substances she'd discounted immediately as unable to bond to anything, too fragile, or too close to frictionless. She needed something that would let her slide around on her backside in the Jefferies tubes without being dangerously slippery or getting torn up on the various access plates.

She'd already noticed two sorts of crawling floors in the tubes: the apparently common circle-perforated sort that shredded her poor knees, plus one other type that was more solid but still had an anti-skid texture that was less than comfortable to crawl on. Anna frowned, thought for a moment, hoisted herself to the console, and then said, "Computer, please list all types of flooring used in horizontal Jefferies tubes on the Enterprise."

The computer chirped and immediately listed four items and their relative percentages for use aboard a Galaxy-class vessel. She nodded as she noted the circular grating accounted for eighty-seven percent of the flooring panels, with the other three making up the rest. Anna wondered what the other types were for, but then decided not to fall down that vertical tube of curious investigation. "I just need to find them," she muttered.

The thought of crawling all over the ship was daunting enough, but the notion that she might inadvertently stumble upon — or worse, provoke a response from — certain people in command made her shudder.

Instead, she decided to go down to the manufacturing replicators Geordi had given her an access code for in Cargo Bay Twelve on Deck Thirty-Nine. She put her leg on and headed down, checking all around her as she went lest she encounter someone unexpected.

I suppose they're all busy with whatever they're doing at this space station, she thought.

The wide double doors to the cargo bay were already open as she approached, so she tentatively watched from down the corridor for a moment before proceeding in case anybody was loading or unloading into it. *We're docked on the other side of the ship so*

probably nobody's going to be doing much here for now, she surmised, trying to inspire herself to hurry up and get on with it.

As she entered the cargo bay, she saw it was clearly used for storing parts made with the incredibly large industrial pair of replicators that met edge-to-edge to take up the entire port wall of the room. Basic metal shelving mounted on anti-grav sliders filled the rest of the room, organised into what Anna immediately recognised as someone's detailed sorting system. She found it pleasing to sort things herself, though she'd never had this much room nor the sheer number of objects to engage in it at this level. Her favourite PADD game was a sorting game, but it didn't hold a candle to this. She smiled admiringly around at the carefully labelled bins and stacks.

With an appreciative nod, she reminded herself that she was there for a reason and approached the first replicator with due caution, knowing it was capable of producing things that could crush her immediately. The Baltimore only had standard replicators and she'd never needed to seek out or use a manufacturing one in any of her work with Doctor Cortez. It had always been someone else's job to fetch whatever she needed.

The operations screen bore a warning against unsanctioned use, but it also had an entry space for an access code, so she decided that Geordi's permission counted as sanctioned use. *I'm only getting flooring panels*, she thought. *Not like I'm ordering up anything dangerous or smashy-heavy or explosive*. She grinned at the thought of what sort of explosive items could be created. *Not today, anyway*.

She entered her code and a parts category list came up. She noticed some of them were dimmed out and laughed softly when she realised they were the categories that contained restricted materials. *Oh come on, I was kidding*, she thought at the machine. *Just because controlled explosions can be fun doesn't mean I was actually going to detonate anything in my lab. That'd get the wrong attention for sure*.

The thought of any attention coming down the corridor reminded her to get to it and return to her people-free lab as fast as possible. She went through the category tree until she found all four flooring panels and ordered up one of each.

“Working,” the computer said, and Anna stepped back to watch the wide delivery pad with great interest but from a distance.

But as she did so, she heard a sound from the racks of shelves behind her and turned to see a tall, broad-shouldered woman stepping out to regard her curiously. She had a scar on her left cheek that extended up into her short, spiked, light brown hair, and wore the same non-officer engineering jumpsuit as Anna, albeit double Anna’s size at least.

“Jiminy Crickets, I’m sorry!” Anna blurted, not even certain what she was apologizing for. She reflexively dipped in a little curtsy and added, “I didn’t know anyone was here! Geordi said I could come down and get things if I needed to.”

The woman nodded, and Anna relaxed a little as she realised she wasn’t the only one standing with a tense posture. She wasn’t sure what to say next.

The other woman softly said, “It’s fine. Ask if you need help with that thing.”

“I’m sorry if I’m intruding. Or interrupting. Or something.”

The other woman shook her head a little. “You’re not.”

Anna felt as if she was nonetheless, and hardly noticed that the replicator had finished until it made a little chirp. She turned to see the four panels stacked neatly on top of each other on the delivery pad.

The woman pointed to a set of carts along the back wall. “Use one of those. Those panels are heavier than they look. Need help loading?”

“Oh, um, thank you,” Anna said as she hurried over to get a cart. “I can do it.” She laughed nervously and added, “I’m stronger than I look. Standard G is lower gravity compared to where I grew up.”

The woman nodded and shuffled back to once again hide behind the full shelf.

Anna quickly loaded up the panels — which were indeed heavier than she'd imagined but well within her lifting capacity — and carted them up to the safety and relative privacy of her lab as fast as she could.



Stardate 47157.6 (Friday 27/02/2370, 13:00) — Bridge

After a refreshing, light lunch with Rosen, Picard returned to his ship via the docking port to smile and nod at his crew finishing up the last of their exchange duties. He'd never been keen on the management style of some captains who remained in the upper decks and rarely integrated with the crew at all, and though he was not in a mood to take on a great deal of crew conversation, he knew a brief and pleasant pass-through was often enough to remind everyone that he appreciated their work.

Thus his return to his bridge came with an unmistakably lighter gait and general expression. He took his seat and asked, “Are we ready to be off, Number One?”

“The last team just checked in, so that's all supply exchanges completed. The hospitality team welcomed the Tarkanians on board about an hour ago,” Riker replied.

“Excellent.” He lowered his voice a little to ask, “Any drama on that front yet?”

“They're already demanding to meet you, of course.”

“Well that's usual for any diplomatic envoy that comes aboard, isn't it?”

“Can't think offhand of any who didn't ask to see you right away,” Riker replied with a laugh.

“Comes with the job, Number One.”

“The popularity or the tedium?”

“Both, I’m afraid,” Picard said with a light smile. “They can wait until our welcome banquet this evening, I’m sure.”

Riker turned to the ensign at the helm and ordered, “Set course for Starbase 718, warp seven.”

“Aye sir,” came the reply.

Picard leaned back in his chair and said, “Engage.”



Stardate 47158.0 (Friday 27/02/2370, 16:04) — Data’s Quarters

Data had left the bridge at standard shift rotation at 1500, but while attending to some of his regular tasks at the console in his quarters he noticed an increasing portion of his processing was shifting to wonder about Anna, so much so that he checked her current location and learned she was in main engineering. He frowned at the phenomenon, not out of any emotional consideration but in deep curiosity as to why it kept happening and with greater frequency the longer she was on board. It made no sense to him why any individual should so frequently dominate his thoughts without immediate and obvious cause.

He sat up straight and ran a general diagnostic of his systems. When he found nothing wrong, his expression changed to one of bemusement. “Hm,” he said.

He decided the puzzle warranted a change of venue, so he rose, checked that his dress uniform laid out on a chair was immaculate for the diplomatic event later in the evening, and then noted that Spot was sleeping on the back of the sofa on the other side of the room. Data raised an eyebrow at Spot, and then hung the uniform on a hook on the wall instead.

Spot opened one eye at him briefly, and then curled herself into a tighter spiral.

“Hm,” Data said again and walked out of the quarters.

On the way to engineering, he considered a multitude of legitimate reasons for him to go there that had nothing to do with Anna, yet when he arrived he performed none of those potential tasks. Instead he went directly to the core to see that once again she was idly dancing on the upper landing and once again engrossed in some kind of measurements with a tricorder.

For no valid reason he could identify, Data went up the ladder to interact with her, taking care to ensure she saw him approaching so he did not startle her from behind, as per her original request list to Geordi.

As soon as she noticed him, that familiar smile flooded her face and he found himself drawn towards it, towards her.

“You are dancing again,” he observed.

“Yes, I’m dancing to distract myself from my own nerves and keep me here instead of fleeing all the time.”

“What song were you dancing to this time?” he asked, uncertain how to address her other concerns.

Her smile grew as she leaned closer and softly sang, “*All alone I have cried silent tears full of pride, in a world made of steel, made of stone.*” She began to sway again lightly as she continued, “*Well I hear the music, close my eyes, feel the rhythm.*” With her eyes closed she wrapped her arms around herself, still swaying, tricorder still in hand, and sang out more confidently, “*Wrap around, take ahold of my heart! What a feeling! Bein’s believing!*” She opened her eyes and spun around once, the smile bright and enormous on her face. “*I can have it all, now I’m dancing for my life!*” She stopped the dance to laugh again.

Data attempted to smile back with equal enthusiasm, but recognised he was unlikely to succeed. “I am unfamiliar with that song, but it appears to be inspiring you.”

“Very much, yes. The next bit is that you should take your passion and make it happen, and I did that by getting off Covaris Two. And then it says something about pictures coming alive and I really did often think of the pictures of my Aunties in my ship as

being real people all around me.” The smile faded again. “I suppose that’s a bit ridiculous.”

Data’s immediate thought was to cite Counselor Troi’s past encouragement to him to decorate his quarters in a way that inspired contemplation of the emotions he would like to experience, but he knew mentioning Troi would likely upset Anna. Instead he said, “I have heard that it can be psychologically beneficial to decorate one’s space in a manner consistent with one’s emotional needs in mind. Since you were lonely, it makes sense that you would attempt to alleviate your loneliness in this manner. It is not ridiculous at all.”

“Not even the part where they’re all long dead and not related to me at all?”

Data shook his head. “I have often had meaningful experiences with long-deceased figures I admire via the holodeck.”

Her eyes went wide. “Jiminy Crickets, that’s amazing! What sort of people did you speak with? Or did you just watch famous speeches?”

“I have indeed reviewed several scientific lectures, some reconstructed, some actual recordings rendered in immersive holodeck programs. But at other times I have programmed historical figures I admire to simply play poker with me.”

“A holodeck can do that?!”

“Yes.”

“Gosh. I know almost nothing about holodecks. Didn’t have anything like that on the Baltimore.”

“Have you never experienced one otherwise?”

Anna shook her head.

“I would be happy to show you how to use one whenever you wish.”

“Oh,” she said nervously. “They’re all up in the saucer section, though.”

“Yes. Are you still feeling apprehensive about going up there again?”

She cringed. “Yeah, a bit.”

Data did not know how to reply. He wanted to reassure her of her safety and that he would remain with her, but whatever had happened at Geordi's birthday party in Ten Forward had clearly left a negative impression on her.

Anna shrugged and resolutely said, "Maybe eventually. Just not yet."

Data nodded. "Whenever you wish to try, I would be happy to accompany you in any way that would enable your confidence."

"You're very —" she cut herself off with a laugh. "I was about to say it again."

"The repetition does not bother me."

Her compelling smile returned. "You're very kind," she said softly. "You really, truly do make this whole ship seem safer to me."

"That is because you are safe here," he said.

"With you around, I almost believe it."

"Hey Data, what're you doing up there?" came Geordi's voice from below.

Data and Anna both approached the rail to see him standing with an amused grin, his hands on his hips.

"I am assuring Anna that she is safe aboard the Enterprise."

"Uh, yeah, Anna, you're safe. You okay?"

"Yes," she replied. "Data's just being extra nice."

"Okay, good. Except Data, we've got a diplomatic event to get to."

"Better you than us," Sorenson said with his usual booming laugh from a console hidden from view beneath the deck Data and Anna were standing on.

Geordi turned to Sorenson and replied, "At least there'll be food, Dave."

"We can all go into the break room down the corridor and replicate the same platters," Sorenson said. "And we won't have to wear dress uniforms to do it, or pretend to care about Federation trade policy."

"Oh that does sound dull," Anna said quietly to Data.

“Being incapable of ‘boredom’ has its advantages,” he replied to her as Geordi teased Sorenson about never getting a promotion beyond lieutenant with an attitude like that.

“I suppose you have to go, then,” Anna said.

“Yes,” Data replied. For the first time in his career he experienced misgivings for having been invited to a senior officers’ event. “Will you feel safe enough here even if I go?”

She smiled again, though not as brightly. “I’ll be fine. It’s pretty quiet in here right now anyway, given that so many folks were busy with DS4 stuff this morning. But I’m planning to be here until I get exhausted enough to sleep, so if your event does manage to bore you, I’ll still be here until late.”

“I will plan to return at the conclusion of the event, then,” he said.

The pair stood looking at each other intently for a moment, but then Geordi called from below, “I don’t know about you, Data, but I need to go get ready. See you there!”

Data did not respond to Geordi, but he put on what he considered to be his most pleasant smile, nodded at Anna, then turned and went back to the main deck. Once below, he looked back up at her, smiled again, appreciated the one she gave him in return, and finally left.



Stardate 47158.3 (Friday 27/02/2370, 18:30) — Ten Forward

Picard strode purposefully out of his quarters, down the corridor to the nearest turbolift, got in, and told it to take him to Deck Ten. He tugged on his dress uniform to straighten it and brushed once more at his sleeves; both entirely unnecessary actions insofar as he was already neat as a pin, yet as always they were motions that defined his propriety and professionalism.

He put on his most gracious smile as he approached the door. *A nice, dull, diplomatic banquet is exactly what I need right now. I'm good at this.*

As soon as he stepped into the room, dozens of eyes turned his way and he heard Riker say, "See? Here he is now." It only took the briefest glance in Will's direction to observe that his first officer was already shooting him a look of warning covered with the veneer of a grin.

Standing beside Riker was the Tarkanian Picard recognised from Rosen's files as Doctor Yommet; indeed very much like a grey-skinned Saurian — though he knew better than to mention that. As Troi had mentioned, Yommet sported several tattoos extending from his forehead back and around his ear-holes. He was dressed in a close-fitting garment that went from neck to toe, incorporating what appeared to be protective soles on the underside of the feet, with sleeves that ended as fingerless gloves over the palms of his thumbless hands. The shimmery material caught the light similarly to a tropical fish, the colours shifting as he moved.

And move he did, with incredible speed and grace to approach Picard with both hands reaching forward. "Ah, at last, the famous Captain Picard!" he said in a silky, fluid voice.

Picard extended a hand and Yommet took it between his. Picard noted that Yommet's skin was very cool to the touch, but also very dry, and he immediately thought it would be unlikely that Cardassians and Tarkanians would enjoy shaking each other's hands at all. *And it would be convenient if the Federation had a relationship with the Tarkanians before the Cardassians even have a chance,* came the strategic thought.

He also noted that Yommet was trailed closely by five other Tarkanians, much taller with wider shoulders, though it was difficult to be certain because their outfits were the opposite of the scientist's; shoulders that came to curved points on both sides and another point at the waist — quite similar to a Cardassian military uniform — but then flaring out again from the waist in overlapping

plates like ancient Samurai armour that reached nearly to the floor. *Indeed, everything about them from their aggressive postures to what I'm guessing are some kind of clan or factional crests on their breastplates screams warrior*, Picard silently observed.

But he kept his visible attention on the man holding his hand and said, "You must be Doctor Yommet. I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance."

"I am," Yommet replied. "It is kind of you to grant us passage on your very fine and nearly overly-luxurious vessel, Captain."

"It is our pleasure, Doctor. I trust your accommodations are satisfactory?" he asked, catching a glimpse of Riker's raised eyebrow in the background.

"Yes," Yommet said, finally letting go of Picard's hand to make wide, flowing gestures in the air. "So spacious with so many fine textures. A true delight of the senses. Though I am afraid there was a...misunderstanding about the decor."

"Oh?" Picard asked.

Riker stepped forward to say, "We failed to warn our guests that the flowering plants we'd put in the quarters by way of welcome were meant for aesthetic purposes and not as food."

"Oh I see," Picard said with genuine concern.

Yommet gestured to one of his party behind him and said, "Do not worry. Vaad has already recovered. It does not appear to have been in any way poisonous so much as...unpleasant."

"I'm terribly sorry to hear it. Do you require medical attention?" Picard asked the towering figure behind Yommet.

"No," came the stark reply.

Yommet smiled, much wider than he'd ever seen a Saurian do, quite nearly ear-to-ear. "It is no worry at all, Captain. We apologise if the flowers will be missed."

"Not at all," Picard said. He gestured towards the food table and said, "Presumably Commander Riker has informed you that the food we are serving here has been fully researched to hopefully meet with your approval."

“Yes, yes. Commander Riker has been most accommodating. You humans are remarkably hospitable.”

“I am very glad to hear it. Would you care to eat now or —“

“Captain, no, I’m afraid our daily nourishment needs have already been taken care of. Though we do appreciate your attempted efforts here.”

“Doctor Yommet was just explaining to me some cultural differences in social eating schedules between our cultures,” Riker said, which Picard knew meant he’d been fielding several unexpected complaints.

Yommet waved his hands dismissively. “But that is no matter. The important thing is that you are here, Captain. There are so many things I wish to discuss with you.”

“I am quite keen to hear them,” Picard replied as he braced for a deluge.



Across the room, Troi, Crusher, and Worf stood watching the Tarkanian party interact with Riker and Picard.

“They’re incredibly graceful, aren’t they?” Crusher remarked.

“Yes,” Troi agreed. “The way Doctor Yommet moves, I half expect him to start swimming through the air at any moment.”

“It is not Yommet that concerns me,” Worf grumbled.

Crusher nudged him gently. “It’s supposed to be a welcoming event, Worf. You’re on duty in a diplomatic capacity right now. Let your security team worry about the rest.”

Worf glanced at Crusher briefly, then turned his wary eye back to Yommet’s companions. “I am still chief of security. That does not cease simply because there is a buffet.”

“Have you tried the honey cake, Worf? Guinan put out a traditional Russian recipe just for you,” Troi said as she nibbled some from the plate she was holding. “It’s heavenly.”

“It will not be as good as my mother’s,” Worf declared.

Crusher patted his arm. “Well that’s what any good son would say, but she’d want you to enjoy yourself.”

Worf grunted.

“I want to know where I can get some of that fabric Yommet is wearing,” Troi said. “Can you imagine a flowing dress in that?”

“That would look stunning on you,” Crusher replied.

“The others are clearly wearing warriors’ clothing,” Worf said, managing to sound both approving and disapproving at the same time.

“Yes, and everything about them tells me that’s exactly what they are, as we suspected,” Troi agreed.

“But I’m fairly certain Yommet is not hiding a tail in that body suit,” Crusher noted.

“There is plenty of room for the others to be hiding all manner of weaponry amongst their attire,” Worf said.

“True,” Troi agreed again. “But presumably your team ensured that isn’t the case.”

“We have...diplomatically handled it,” Worf confirmed.

“Good,” Crusher said. “Then you can relax and have a good time.”

Worf grunted again and crossed his arms.

Crusher turned to Troi and they shrugged at each other.



After scarcely ten minutes of listening to Yommet, Picard understood why Rosen wanted them gone and why Riker had made an excuse to return to the bridge. There was nothing in particular he could point to as offensive; rather, it was an endless pattern of what began as appreciation or praise for something only to end in what was ultimately a complaint. It wasn’t all about DS4 or the Enterprise, either. Yommet drifted from topic to topic aimlessly, pining for a particular beloved aspect of home only to turn around and denigrate it the next moment. He heaped praise upon Rosen and her staff but somehow managed to portray them as incapable

of anything. Even his own companions did not escape this treatment as he prattled on about everything from the delights and pains of traveling with others to both the anticipated excitement and predicted disappointment of the upcoming conference on Starbase 718.

What Picard gleaned from the tidbits Yommet leaked about the others was that he didn't really consider them part of his team at all, that somehow in this setting he was the one with the power to speak over them, yet was likely beholden to them away from foreign eyes. Troi's assessment of this as a culture experiencing fluctuations in caste and class hierarchy appeared to be unfolding in the micro sense right before him.

Much as Picard wanted to continue to learn all that he could, the undulating nature of the conversation was exhausting, especially given how little sleep he'd had. When Yommet next paused for breath in between his ramblings, Picard interjected, "I understand from Commander Rosen that your field is researching matter/anti-matter handling and efficiency."

Yommet blinked his large, glassy black eyes several times rapidly at the change in topic, and then suddenly replied, "Yes! Yes! And not just efficiency, Captain! So many species have taken so gloriously to the stars with so many types of warp drive yet all manage to have the same essential failings in terms of safety for crews and space alike. Even our own ships could do so much better. It is my intention to meet with other specialists in the field at the conference and try to work out together where all the mistakes are so we can improve it all for everyone."

"A very laudable goal, doctor," Picard replied.

"I'm so glad you think so. I've studied what information I could get about your own drive on this type of Federation vessel, and I'm proud to say I'm entirely familiar with your storage and injection systems, at least in diagram form. Captain, would you kindly do me the honour of allowing me to view your drive in person? If we could go down now and have even the briefest peek, well...seeing

it with my own eyes would be immensely useful and — if I may say so — personally quite gratifying.”

Ordinarily, Picard would have deferred such a significant request or found a way around it entirely. Main engineering was a secured area for many reasons, and not every VIP guest on board was granted access. Even on occasions when tours were conducted, they usually were planned well in advance to ensure the area was locked down and no staff were engaged in anything that could be problematic if glimpsed by a curious onlooker. The notion of a surprise tour upon request would normally be unthinkable.

However, Picard recalled Admiral Chekote’s words that he was to extend “every level of gracious hospitality towards our new friends at the highest diplomatic level”. He also knew his crew had handled snap tours in the past, albeit with some difficulty. Thus — despite his instinct otherwise — he smiled once more and said, “Let me see what I can arrange.”

Yomet bowed deeply in what Picard guessed to be exaggerated gratitude, perhaps with a bit of faux deference, but at least the onerous conversation was paused. With immense relief Picard backed away and sought out La Forge, who was inspecting the far end of the buffet table.

Picard approached his chief engineer with a modicum of his own deference. “Mr. La Forge, may I have a word?”

“Of course, Captain.”

Picard leaned in closer and said, “Doctor Yomet has requested a tour of main engineering.”

“Sure, sir, we can set something up. They’ll be on board for what, two weeks?”

“He wants to see it now.”

La Forge was taken aback. “What? Why now?”

“Not for any particularly good reason I can fathom other than perhaps to test the limits of our hospitality. How fast can you have it secure?”

La Forge puffed out his cheeks and blew a stream of air as he calculated the request. “I guess there’s nothing big going on down

there tonight, not with Data and me up here anyway. Give me...ten minutes?”

Picard was surprised and impressed. “Really? I assumed you’d ask for more.”

La Forge shrugged. “I’ve got people trained and ready to handle this sort of thing after what happened last time someone sprung a tour on us. Sorenson’s already there, I just need to summon in Tyler and Myers for the diplomatic side, and Navarro to oversee security.”

“Well then, by all means make it so, Mr. La Forge.”

“Yes sir,” the engineer said, setting his plate down on the discard tray to the side of the table. He headed out of Ten Forward, tapping his badge as he went, already issuing orders to his team.

Picard could not help but beam with pride as he returned to the delegation and informed them, “My chief engineer is on his way to prepare the area at once. We can head down shortly.”

Yommet clapped his hands together in delight. “How delightful, Captain Picard! I must say, the Federation continues to impress with your endless respect for the pursuit of knowledge.”

“Yes. Well. That is why we’re all out here, isn’t it?”

CHAPTER SIX

Stardate 47158.3 (Friday 27/02/2370, 18:56) — Main Engineering

Anna sat on the upper deck beside the warp core, her artificial leg off and sitting beside her while she swung her biological left foot idly below the deck's edge. Her right arm was loosely draped around a railing support, not because she felt the need to hold on for safety so much as to give that illusion to anyone else who might look at her.

But nobody took notice as engineering remained even quieter than it was before Data and Geordi had left. A reduced evening shift was going about its business with minimal chatter and nobody bothering to even look at the upper deck at all.

Anna had been mucking about in the test bed down in the chief engineer's corner, but had grown bored of it and gone to the upper deck instead to let herself be lulled by the cascading blue lights. Their soothing effect tempted her to close the tests down for the night and go back to her quarters for some sleep, but there were still a few concepts rolling around in her head that she wanted to at least make notes of. Despite her phenomenal memory, nebulous ideas often faded if she slept before making more deliberate records; sometimes even the briefest note could help her recall a vast quantity of information later.

Besides, she thought, Data said he'd come down later. I'll hang out here until he does. It'd be nice to do some casual work with him when hardly anyone is around overnight.

She leaned back on her hands and stretched her leg out before her, amused at the idea of accidentally kicking the warp core though she knew it was still too far away to reach. Anna waggled her foot playfully in its direction anyway and softly laughed at herself.

She sighed and let her mind start to wander again as she stared into the depths of the glowing blue rings, imagining herself flying into the core itself to watch the matter and anti-matter streams collide in perfect alignment within the dilithium crystal, sending out the split plasma stream into the transfer conduits that carried the juice up to the nacelles. It was fun to imagine riding the pulsating waves of energy, carried along like a leaf on a river.

Anna had just begun to shift her thoughts to the first time she ever saw a river in real life when she became peripherally aware of an increase in activity below. Leaning forward a little, she saw Aisling had returned to engineering and was rushing around doing something, giving quiet orders to a few others. A moment later more of the engineering team hurried in. All of them appeared to be switching the consoles to default LCARS menus.

Is there some kind of emergency? Anna wondered, though there was no indication of a red or even yellow alert. *And why shut the screens to default if there was an emergency? Wouldn't that be the time to be actually using the consoles to fix the emergency?*

Concerned that someone would shut down her test bed before she had a chance to record her rambling thoughts, she quickly put on her leg and went down the ladder to return to that station. But before she sat down, Geordi burst in and called out, “Okay people, we’ve got a snap tour coming through! Let’s get everything secured and get in diplomat-ready positions so we can make this as short and sweet as possible.”

Anna was confused, but hurried to enter sufficient notes into the test bed that she could return to the project later. She heard Geordi giving the others instructions but only half paid attention as she quickly tapped on the screen.

Before she could finish, Geordi came up alongside her and said, “Hey, Anna, sorry about this, but the Tarkanians are about to get a tour. Sometimes command springs this sort of thing on us.”

“What do I do? I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do,” she replied nervously.

“You don’t really have to do anything about it other than shut down the test bed for now. We need all consoles locked down.”

Anna nodded, said, “Yes, yes, of course,” as she tapped the last few things out of her head and into the file, and then quickly closed it all.

“Okay Sorenson, Tyler, Myers, positions like we’ve rehearsed!” Geordi called out, then turned back to Anna to gently add, “Command staff will be coming down too.”

Anna froze for a moment in panic.

“Just go. No need for you to be here for any of this,” he said.

Anna nodded and headed for the door to the vertical Jefferies tube she’d gotten used to climbing up and sliding down to zip back and forth between her quarters and main engineering, but was horrified to find the door was closed. She put her hand on it to try to open it, but Aisling rushed over to inform her, “Sorry, all secondary exits are closed for tours. We have to control where people go.”

“But I need to get out!”

“You’ll have to go out the usual way, through the corridor to the turbolifts. I’m sorry.”

As Anna turned towards the main entrance, Data came through that way and announced, “Here they come.”

With her last remnant of self-control, Anna suppressed a scream, turned, and fled back into the heart of engineering, climbing up the decks as she had on her very first day: hoisting herself with incredible speed up over railings, up the wall using jutting supports as hand-holds, and onto the narrow, circular ledge that surrounded where the matter reaction assembly portion of the warp core passed out of main engineering into the decks above. This ring housed an assortment of cables, hoses, and conduits that encircled the drive, but there was enough room for her to squeeze herself into the curve and hide mostly out of sight.

There she remained, trembling, trying not to cry, unable to see far enough into the front end of engineering to know that Aisling

and Data were exchanging a look of concern as the command staff and Tarkanian delegation entered the room.



It was only as they rounded the corner into main engineering that Picard realised Anna could be in there. His gut clenched for a moment, but he smiled his way through it as he said, “Here we are, Doctor Yommet, the main engineering section of the Enterprise.”

Yommet gracefully extended his arms wide, made little circles with his hands, and then brought them together in a joyful clasp. “My oh my, Captain Picard, what a lovely sight indeed. Even if it is oddly small and cramped.”

Picard patiently explained, “It is one of the unique design features of the Galaxy Class to keep the main engineering area small and focused primarily on the warp core, shunting other systems management to different rooms nearby. As I’m sure our chief engineer Lieutenant Commander La Forge here will be happy to discuss at great length, the advanced nature of the Galaxy’s drive at the time of launch had the designers concerned about safety management, so while all systems can be accessed from this central area, in the event of a dangerous malfunction the crew is not cut off from engineering capability as was the case in earlier class types.”

“That’s right, sir,” La Forge piped up. “We’ve also found that Galaxy Class crew response times within main engineering are significantly faster than those with more spacious areas. There are times more room would be nice, but everyone here is pretty happy with this design. If you’d like to come with me, Doctor, I can show you some other ways we maximise efficiency. My staff behind you are available for your entire team’s questions and needs.”

None of the other Tarkanians appeared particularly impressed or even interested in La Forge or his words, though they were all eyeing the consoles carefully. Yommet, by contrast, seemed positively giddy to be led around by La Forge.

Navarro eventually succeeded in rounding up the rest of them to show them around, though their questions were terse, making it difficult for any of the Enterprise crew to establish any sort of rapport.

As he watched Navarro lead the clearly-not-scientist contingent towards the glowing core, Picard approached Data and asked, “What do you make of them?” He’d noticed Data was watching them all quite intently.

Without taking his eyes off the group, Data replied, “I am as yet uncertain, Captain. While Yommet’s interest is clearly the technology involved, the rest of his party behave as neither engineers nor scientists. Yet they have not demonstrated any open aggression that indicates a security risk. My current leading estimation is that they are here to monitor Yommet, though that calculation is shifting as I observe that two of them appear to be counting the number of consoles in this section,” he said with a sudden furrowed brow and head tilt.

Picard turned to look at the Tarkanians but could not discern the pattern Data had noticed. “Do you believe that is a security concern, Data?”

“Uncertain. The dimensions of this room and general systems layout are not particularly secured sets of information, sir. Further, all consoles are locked out of any sensitive systems. I merely note it as an odd behaviour if my original estimation regarding their role is accurate.”

“Hm,” Picard said. “They are indeed an enigmatic people.”

“Yes sir.” Data raised his brows and added, “Then again, I am often baffled by various humanoid behaviours, so perhaps my observations should not be considered indicative of anything.”

“On the contrary, Data, your observations and unique insights are of tremendous value to me.”

Data finally turned to look at Picard. “Thank you sir. I appreciate that very much.”

They watched as La Forge directed Yommet back to the main group as Sorenson took over from Navarro, allowing the latter to

resume a more watchful security eye, with Myers and Tyler standing on either side smiling and ready to assist as needed.

Picard said softly, “Geordi’s got them on a precision performance, hasn’t he?”

“Yes sir. They have been practising for these sorts of occasions.”

“I’m impressed. I suppose I ought to join back in to some degree.”

“If you wish, sir,” Data replied.

Picard had hoped Data might say something that would give him an excuse not to proceed further into main engineering, lest Anna be somewhere nearby. But when no excuse was forthcoming, he clasped his hands behind his back and once again joined the diplomatic ensemble.



On the ledge high above, Anna laid on her back, curved up against the warm conduits, left foot flat on the ledge and the knee up with her right knee clamped tightly against the left and her artificial leg awkwardly jammed against the edge of the precipitous drop, her hands tightly gripped over her abdomen, all in a failed attempt to stop shaking. She tried to take deep breaths but they remained ragged in utter panic from the moment she’d first heard Picard’s voice below.

Despite her mother’s bans on any photos or videos of Picard, little Anna had found one of his archaeological society lectures in the Baltimore’s archives and had been fascinated to watch it repeatedly until she knew every word, every tone, every gesture. Her mother had caught her at it and deleted it, but Anna had hidden copies of the file in other systems in anticipation of her mother’s reaction, so after the crash she was readily able to access it at her leisure.

Over the years as she’d grown to resent and eventually hate him for having left her to die on Covaris Two, she’d stopped watching

it. But hearing his voice in person for the first time brought back all of the bitter feelings of abandonment she'd had throughout her childhood. She was flooded with anger, sadness, and the ache of unfulfilled longing for any sort of familial connection. She was glad the other nerve-wracking events of the day had made her skip lunch so that there was nothing to throw up as her whole mind and body roiled with the agony of it all.

Why did I come here? What was I thinking, coming on his ship? Of course I couldn't avoid him. Of course he'd come along eventually. Is he taunting me? Does he even know I'm in here? Does he even care? She couldn't decide which was worse, but all of it was awful.

She realised her attempts to calm herself weren't working, so she gave up and carefully turned onto her side enough that she could peek over the ledge. Below, she saw the engineering crew talking to some very fish-lizard-like aliens she'd never seen before. Just as she began to wonder about them, she saw Picard come into view, and all of her tumultuous emotions collapsed into a singularity of pure rage.

Look at him, arrogantly showing off his ship, as if he designed any of it. I bet he couldn't fix any of it if it broke down. I bet I'm better at fixing things than he is. I bet I'm a better person than he is. I'd never do what he's done. I'd never be anything like him at all, she thought as her lip curled into a snarl. They all worship him so much but what do they know of who he really is? These nice people, how shocked they'd be if they knew the truth. Would they still follow him if they knew he left his own child to die on a desert world? Would they still be so obedient and respectful if they knew how horrible he really is?

Then, very softly so that she could scarcely hear herself over the hum of the drive, she sang, *"If you strip away the myth from the man, you will see where we all soon will be."*



Data continued to watch the tour group carefully, maintaining his distance but going further into engineering as they were led around the warp core. When he reached the edge of the core's tall bay, he stopped watching the group for a moment, long enough to glance upwards at the conduit ring on the ceiling.

Geordi approached and muttered, "Did Anna go up there again?"

"I believe so."

"Can you see her?"

"No, but I believe she is ensuring that nobody can."

"I don't like it," Geordi said with a sigh.

"I anticipate she likes this situation even less."

Geordi nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"There is a high probability that she is afraid of your response to her climbing up there again."

"Yeah, well, I can't openly condone it, can I? I get it, but I just want her to be safe."

"One of us should speak to her at the end of this event to assure her that you are concerned but not angry."

"Yeah, whichever of us escapes this bullshit first," Geordi said with another sigh.

Data tilted his head and furrowed his brow at his friend's unusual expletive, but then his brow arched again and he merely said, "Hm."



To La Forge's chagrin, the tour lingered on for some time. He was, however, pleased with how his team performed, particularly regarding Yommet's inexplicably random questions coupled with compliments and associated digs after each. He reminded himself this was why he wore gold instead of red as he watched the Captain deflect everything that Yommet lobbed.

He noted that Ensign Tyler in particular handled the whole thing brilliantly. She wasn't the foremost engineer of her

graduating class, but an instructor at the Academy had specifically recommended her to him as one of those rare gems who could handle both machines and people. He grinned appreciatively as he watched her deftly redirect one of the Tarkanians who kept trying to poke at the consoles.

He was still watching her smile and guide them around when he noticed the Captain had broken off from the group once again and was on his way over.

“Mr. La Forge, your team is to be commended,” Picard said.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll pass that along.”

“Thank you for making what could have been a very awkward evening a diplomatic success. You may have just helped set the first stones in the bridge to wider relations with the Tarkanians.”

“Happy to do my part, sir. Any idea how long they’re going to want to be in here?”

“I’m afraid not. They do seem awfully curious about the strangest things, don’t they?”

“Mmhm,” Geordi said.

Picard crossed his arms as the two stood and watched the tour continue. After a time he said quietly, “I’m glad Specialist White isn’t here. I felt awful as we came in when I realised too late that I might be failing on her request to not be approached by command.”

“Uh, she’s here, sir.”

Picard turned to him in alarm. “She is?”

“Yeah. She’s hiding.”

“Hiding?” the Captain asked incredulously, his voice rising slightly. “How does one hide in main engineering?”

“She didn’t get a chance to get out before you were all coming in, so she ran back into the warp area to hide.”

Picard looked annoyed, but he lowered his tone once more. “I’ve just walked all around the entire drive. There’s nobody hiding back there.”

“Uh, she’s found a place. I don’t like it, but I’m beginning to realise that she’s bitten off more than she can chew leaving Earth

again. And if we want to keep her here — which I do — then I need to go along with some of her self-protective —“

Across the room, Yommet suddenly burst into applause and nudged his counterparts to join him, which they reluctantly did.

“Please let that mean they’re wrapping up,” La Forge said.

Picard asked, “You were saying that we need to help her feel that it’s safe to hide?”

La Forge turned back to Picard and began to feel like he was caught in a very strange tennis tournament. “Uh, yes sir. I’m not sure if the Tarkanians scared her or not, but I’m pretty sure you and Commander Riker do.”

Picard took a deep breath. “I see. Well then, I suppose we have no choice but to respect this boundary of hers for now.”

Geordi was baffled why the Captain would even bring Anna up in the first place, but decided this was as good a time as any to put his stamp on the issue. “Honestly sir, I’d really appreciate it on both a personal and professional level if you both could do that. I don’t want her to leave, and I’m pretty sure she will if we spook her too much. At least until the new drive’s installed.”

Picard nodded. “We’ll do our best.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The Captain put his diplomatic smile back on, said, “Anyway, well done Mr. La Forge. Well done on all of it,” and walked away to join the tour group once more.

Geordi shook his head in confusion. He looked to Data, who was standing and watching the tour group intently, but as Picard crossed in front of him, he turned and gave Geordi a little shrug.

Geordi shrugged back. *All of this is weird and I want it to be done with*, he thought tiredly. He had a week-old message from his mother that was now awkwardly overdue for a response, and he found he’d rather be up in his quarters fending off her latest attempts to find him a girlfriend than getting mixed up in whatever drama was going on with the Captain, Anna, and Tarkanians lingering in his engineering domain.



Stardate 47158.4 (Friday 27/02/2370, 19:48) — Main Engineering

Anna gradually noticed that engineering had finally gone quiet again, though she waited a bit longer before moving just to be sure. She'd returned to lying on her back after seeing Picard, in part because she was sorely tempted to leap down there and blurt out to everyone what a horrible, child-abandoning fiend he was. But she knew he'd deny it and nobody would believe her, and then he'd have her dumped off at the next space station or worse, put out an airlock when nobody who cared about her was watching.

She shuddered again at the thought, closing her eyes against the memories of the airlock on the Baltimore and what had been done to her there.

As the tour had droned on, her seething rage had calmed back down into her more usual mix of sadness and general fear that if she ever met the man face-to-face, he'd say the Worst Words to her, repeating what her mother had told her he'd said about not wanting children at all and even if he had, it wouldn't be her. But as usual, merely thinking about the Worst Words brought up the memory of the first time she'd heard them, and stuck on a narrow ledge above the warp drive all she could do was lie there and try not to fall off as she wept in desperate silence.

Caught in this miasma of pain and longing, she hadn't even noticed when the tour group left, so the realization that they had was unnerving. Anna shifted to her right side so she could peek over the edge once more, concocting a notion that they were all going to be down there still, looking up at her, staring in accusation and loathing.

But there was nobody standing there, nobody looking up. She watched for a moment and saw Sorenson walk by with a PADD in his hand, but he didn't look up either. She could hear a bit of

conversation — mostly Sorenson’s usual booming tones — but nothing alarming.

After a few minutes, she sat up and carefully made her way back to the closest wall. As silently as she could, she swung herself to it and slid down, gripping a corner with her hands and left foot, using her artificial right foot as a stiff brace. When she landed on the upper deck, she quickly went to the front and crouched down low by the wall there to have a better peek at who was on the main floor.

Listening carefully, she figured out that Sorenson was talking to Tyler in the rear corner about something to do with the tour. They sounded reasonably happy.

Leaning forward a little, she spied Navarro entering information into one of the central consoles. The door just past her to the vertical Jefferies tube was open again, but Anna knew she couldn’t get by without being noticed. She waited a time, watching Aisling work. When the security engineer yawned, Anna wanted to make a break for it, but still knew she could not possibly be fast enough.

Anna sat down on the deck, her back to the wall, and pondered what to do next. All she wanted to do was escape unnoticed, but since that was impossible she evaluated other potential courses of action and found she didn’t like any of them. She glanced around again, saw Aisling still at the console, sighed, and decided there was no way she was getting out without some kind of conversation.

She stood, poked her face to see if it seemed too hot or swollen from crying, sighed again at the uncertainty of that, and made her way to the ladder. Instead of sliding down, she crept as quietly as she could, still hoping to tiptoe around behind Aisling on the other side of the central table and sneak out.

But as soon as she came out of the warp core area, Aisling turned to her and smiled warmly. “Hi there. You okay?”

Anna wasn’t sure how to answer, but didn’t want to have to explain anything and the best way to avoid that was to pretend.

“I’m fine,” she lied as she inched her way through the room, her back to the consoles but as far from Aisling as possible.

It didn’t work. Aisling approached and said in that slightly-too-obvious gentle tone people used when they were trying not to spook her, “It’s okay to be nervous around new people like that, especially when we know so little about them.”

It took Anna a moment to realise that Aisling thought she was afraid of the Tarkanians, when she hadn’t really cared about them at all. “Uh...yeah,” she said awkwardly.

Aisling came up too close for Anna’s comfort but Anna resisted the urge to back away. Aisling leaned in and whispered, “I’m kind of impressed at how fast you got up there to hide.”

Anna’s gut clenched. “You saw me?”

“Yeah. But don’t worry, I won’t tell anybody. Data saw too, but both of us were just worried about you, that’s all.” She laughed a little. “I don’t think he wanted to go back up to the banquet at all. He kept trying to hang out and keep an eye on you without looking like he was watching you. He really is adorable when he thinks he’s being subtle.” Aisling suddenly looked even more concerned as she abruptly added, “By the way, I wanted to apologise again for yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” Anna asked, too overwhelmed to even know what time or day it was anymore.

“With the security questions. I’m not normally like that, all weird and awkward.”

“Oh. I am.”

Aisling laughed again, but it was a kind, indulging laugh without a hint of mockery. “I think you’re actually pretty great. I couldn’t help thinking as I got into bed that I should be doing this,” she said as she extended a hand.

Anna tentatively took it and Aisling gave her a firm handshake, saying, “This is me inviting you to a friendship. I know you’ve got Geordi and Data in your corner but women need to stick together too.”

Anna let go of her hand but said, “Um, that would be nice.”

Aisling grinned. “Good. We’re friends now,” she declared. “And you don’t ever have to tell me about how you hacked that system. I want to make it clear that I’m not sucking up to you for that.”

“Okay.”

Aisling put her hands on her hips and tilted her head inquisitively. “Anna, how many friends have you ever had before?”

Anna shrugged. “You mean besides Geordi and Data?”

“Yes.”

“Um. I’m not sure. It’s hard for me to tell how other people feel sometimes but I think probably none.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. We need to fix that. Come here,” she said, beckoning with her hand as she walked past to approach the warp drive bay and call around the corner, “Andrea! Could you come here for a minute, please?”

Ensign Tyler came around, and Anna realised she hadn’t until that moment known her first name. It suddenly occurred to her that the first-name camaraderie was mostly used amongst lieutenants and higher ranks, and that most of the ensigns were still called by their last names. She wondered why but didn’t have time to puzzle it out before Aisling was speaking again.

“You two have met, right?” Aisling asked Andrea.

The latter smiled nervously. “Only in a general sense. I’m a huge fan,” she said to Anna.

“Well I’m upgrading that status,” Aisling said. “We’re all friends now.”

Andrea’s eyes went wide with excitement. “Really?”

“Yep. Anna doesn’t have any women friends so we’re it, and Mack too whenever she’s around next.” Aisling turned to Anna again. “That’s Melissa McKenzie’s nickname. She doesn’t come into main engineering much. I’ll make sure you meet her soon.”

“Okay,” Anna said, not knowing what else she was supposed to say.

“We’re a team, and now you’re part of our team, isn’t she?” Aisling said to Andrea.

The Ensign grinned enormously. “Yes please!”

Anna didn’t understand the enthusiasm; she wanted it to be a good thing, a kind thing, but it didn’t make sense to her since she was usually the one hoping to be liked. She was exhausted and baffled, so all she could think to say was, “I’m...I’m not good at this. I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do now.”

“We’ll help you get good at it,” Aisling said, returning to her earlier gentle, placating tone. “It’s okay. Don’t be nervous. We’re your friends now, and we all have each other’s back.”

Anna mustered up a small smile, thinking how lovely that sounded as an idea but how very unlikely, like a fantasy from her lonely childhood that couldn’t possibly be real. Part of her wanted to beg for exactly that kind of help, to sing out as loud as Cassie did during her audition in *A Chorus Line* demanding to be part of a show again. Anna sang in her head, *Give me a place to fit in! Help me return to the land of the living by showing me how to begin!* But she didn’t know what to say for real, not even a song to sing to let them know how much she wanted what they were offering but how ill-equipped she felt to accept it.

Navarro gave her a pitying look. “You look so overwhelmed and exhausted.”

Anna let out the breath she didn’t even realise she’d been holding. “I am,” she admitted, trying not to cry again.

“I can walk you up to your quarters, if you’re still nervous about the Tarkanians. Even though I’m fairly certain they’re all back up in Ten Forward again with the senior staff.”

Remembering that nobody else knew what was really upsetting her was somehow reassuring. “No, I’m fine. I can go myself. I should go...sleep. Or something.”

“I’m on this shift now because I got called up for the tour, but I’ll be on third shift overnight too, if you want to come back down and talk or whatever,” Andrea offered nervously.

“Maybe,” Anna said. “I never know how long I’m going to sleep for. Thank you both. You’re all so kind here. But I’m going to...” she turned and looked at the door to the Jefferies tube. “I need to go now.”

“Of course,” Aisling said. “But like she said, we’re here if you need us. Promise.”

Anna nodded, smiled again, and at long last left engineering, feeling utterly drained and uncertain about anything other than how desperately she wanted to hide under a thick pile of blankets.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stardate 47159.8 (Saturday 28/02/2370, 07:30) — Main Engineering

Data entered main engineering hoping to see Anna there, even though he had checked her location as he left his overnight bridge duty and noted that she was in her quarters. He performed several routine tasks quietly on his own, occasionally looking at the entrance, but she did not appear.

Geordi came to his side and quietly asked, “Hey, did you get to talk to Anna at all last night?”

“I did not. It is likely she is still experiencing stress.”

“Yeah, I’m worried too. That whole damned thing went on way too long. I thought the Captain’s ears were going to bleed if Yommet talked any longer.”

Data’s brow furrowed. “I do not believe Doctor Yommet was speaking at a volume dangerous to humans.”

Geordi turned to Data in confusion for a moment, but then sighed and shook his head. “I mean...oh never mind. At least you got to escape for bridge duty.”

Data considered mentioning that he would have rather come back to main engineering, but decided he was not yet ready to let Geordi know of his recent changes in personal thought processes. Instead he said, “I am considering checking in on Anna now, but I am concerned about intruding.”

“Yeah I’ve had that thought too. I think from me it might be, but maybe not from you?”

“Why?”

“You and she seem to think a lot alike. You’re on the same page with a lot of stuff.”

Data's brows went up and he tilted his head to the side. "Hm. That is true." The excuse gave him the impetus he had been searching for. "Perhaps I should go now."

"Sure. And if it comes up that I know about the climbing, be sure to tell her it's okay. I'm not angry, just concerned, like you said before."

"Understood," Data said, and quickly turned to leave.

When he arrived at her quarters and activated the chime, there was no answer. He waited for a moment, wondering if she might be sleeping, but then began to calculate any potential likelihood of her being hurt and requiring assistance. As part of this calculation, he turned to look at the door to her lab just down the corridor, and tried that chime instead. He heard her say, "Come in," and the door opened.

She was sitting at her table with an assortment of instruments and bits of black material strewn about. Beside her on the floor were sections of Jefferies tube floor plates. She smiled at him tiredly and said, "Good morning, Data."

"Good morning," he said as the door closed behind him. "Are you well?"

"I suppose. I'm glad you're here," she said as she nudged a chair towards him with her left foot. He noted her artificial leg was in the corner behind her as he sat in the offered chair.

"Thank you. I thought I should check that you were not still frightened from the incursion of the Tarkanian delegation into main engineering last night."

The smile faded and she shrugged.

He continued, "Impromptu tours like that are very rare. All tours are rare, in fact. But we had orders to 'roll out the red carpet' for the Tarkanians. Not a literal red carpet. It is a metaphor indicating an extensive welcome."

Her smile returned. "I know that one, thank you. All those big, old awards shows for the movies and Broadway shows had red carpets. The famous people would walk around on them and everyone would take photos of them. I always thought that was

awfully strange for so many people to be taking the same photo. Why not one and then everyone share?”

“I do not know. Perhaps image sharing was not as convenient in that time.”

“Maybe,” she replied as she once again appeared unhappy. “Will they be coming back?”

“The Tarkanian delegation to engineering? No, I do not think so. I believe their desire to see the drive has been sufficiently met.”

Anna nodded, but did not appear reassured.

Data added, “It is unlikely the command staff will be back soon either. Usually the Captain and Commander Riker only come to engineering if there is a specific problem they need to address. You need not worry that they will be there frequently. Further, Geordi wishes me to tell you that he understands why you climbed up to hide, and though he remains concerned for your safety, he is not angry with you in any way. None of us are.”

She seemed quite relieved at that. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Of course. Will you be returning to engineering today?”

“I don’t know yet. Yesterday...everything was so overwhelming. It was one of those days where you look back and more seems to have happened than should fit into one day, you know?”

“I have heard others speak of such concepts, but my internal chronometer prevents me from experiencing perception-based time dilation.” He glanced at the flooring plates again and asked, “What are you working on?”

At that, her smile grew significantly and he was satisfied that his change of topic yielded such an immediate result. She said, “Oh, that’s still secret. I think I’ll have something ready soon, though.”

“It is good that you have projects to make you happy. Perhaps if you are feeling up to it later, you will join us in engineering again.”

“Will you be there all day?”

“That is my current plan, yes, but I do often get called to other tasks.”

“Then maybe I’ll come down in the afternoon.”

“If you wish.”

She hesitated for a moment and then said, “I feel safer in there when you’re around, even if I’m not right beside you. I’m sorry I ran away from you like that.”

“I do not believe it was me you were running from.”

She looked at him intently. “No. It wasn’t you.”

“I apologise that — in that instance — my presence was insufficient to make you feel safe.”

“Oh, I did still feel safer for you being there when I was hiding. I knew if I was spotted...” She shuddered. “Well I knew I wasn’t alone if things did go wrong. That’s the important thing, right?”

“I would always protect you if there was danger.”

A new sort of smile spread on her face; her eyes were wide and intense as with his preferred smile, but instead of appearing happy, he recognised this variation was desperate and possibly even frightened. He wished he knew what to say to convince her that she was safe.

“I believe you, Data,” she said. “And that’s really new and important to me. Knowing you will come if I call for help is...” She sighed and the smile turned wistful. “It’s a big deal.”

“I appreciate that sentiment. However, I wish very much to normalise this for you.”

“Maybe someday.”

“I will make an effort to demonstrate it repeatedly to advance that outcome.”

That finally elicited the smile he was hoping for, yielding a significant sense of satisfaction. She sighed again, but happily this time, and put her chin in her left hand, her elbow on the table. “Okay, how is this for a plan?” she asked. “You go back to engineering and I’ll muck around a bit more with my weird little project. Then I’ll start to feel a bit lonely up here and tell myself that you’re down in engineering, along with other people who are being really, really kind to me. People I shouldn’t be scared of even if the kindness is strange and a bit overwhelming. So then I’ll

pretend to be a grownup and eat some actual food and then come down and join you all.”

“That is a good plan,” Data agreed. He stood, added, “I will see you there soon.”

“Thanks, Data.”

He nodded and left. When the door closed behind him, he stood in the corridor for several seconds to ponder over every word of their conversation and wonder why he had not wanted it to end.



Stardate 47159.8 (Saturday 28/02/2370, 08:15) — Bridge

Picard emerged from his ready room reading a PADD and headed for his chair.

“I was starting to wonder if you were going to hide from the Tarkanians in there all day,” Riker teased.

Picard smiled indulgently at his first officer as he sat down. “No, Number One, I’m quite recovered, I think.”

“Well that’s good because Yomet’s been trying to send you messages all morning.”

“Has he now?”

“I can pull them up for your PADD or chair if you like.”

Picard held up a hand. “No thank you. Not yet.”

Riker grinned.

Picard leaned a little closer and said, “They are exhausting, but not without merit. I think by the end of the evening I was getting used to the pattern of his conversation, and once I began to anticipate the backswing each time, I found it landed less harshly.”

“Sure,” Riker replied. “It was like being offered a flower and then hit with it. Repeatedly.”

Picard laughed. “Careful Will, that’s very nearly poetry you’re writing there.”

“If it is, it’s because they broke something in my head,” Riker replied with a laugh of his own.

Troi came onto the bridge, took her seat, crossed her legs, folded her hands on her knees, and smiled at the two men. Picard knew in an instant she was scanning him for any signs of requiring intervention, so he made sure to look directly at her to indicate that he was well enough and did not wish to discuss any of it.

But Riker missed the target of her pointed look and casually asked, “Did you enjoy the banquet?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “It was very informative.”

Picard asked, “Did you speak with any of them?”

“Briefly. Doctor Yommet only wanted to talk to you, Captain.”

“Indeed,” Picard replied.

“You appeared to be at your diplomatic best,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“The whole day long, in fact.”

“Yes. Well. It was a long day,” he said cagily, knowing she was fishing, but also knowing she didn’t actually want to reel him in here in front of so many onlookers.

“Hopefully today will be calmer,” she suggested, finally leaning back in her chair, indicating to him that she’d already gotten whatever she wanted.

“Mm,” he conceded. “I think we could all use that.”



Stardate 47160.3 (Saturday 28/02/2370, 11:50) — Main Engineering

Anna crept down the Jefferies tube ladder towards engineering, foregoing her usual slide down the rails for a more cautious approach to suss out who was around before committing herself to engaging in more overwhelming conversations. Just above the top of the open door, she deftly hooked her knees into the rails and

tipped herself back, peering into the room while upside-down, not noticing her dangling braids preceding her like antennae.

She saw Data at the central console, Geordi in his corner, and heard conversations around the corner into the drive area. Nobody seemed ready to pounce, and Data's proximity immediately emboldened her.

He turned and looked over his shoulder, slowly enough that she could have hidden before he saw her, but she remained there, smiling at him mischievously, peeking under the top edge of the door. He smiled back, then turned to face the central console again.

Anna giggled a little, righted herself, disengaged her knee lock, and slid down the remainder of the bars. She scampered to his side and beamed up at him.

"For the record, I heard your approach," he said. "However, I do not believe many others would have. I was anticipating your arrival and thus more attuned to your likely vector."

"That's okay. I don't mind you knowing where I am."

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yes. Your visit helped. A lot."

"That is good. However, it occurred to me after I left that I should have offered you a joke to cheer you up."

"You cheered me up plenty, but I'll take a joke now."

They both turned to note that Geordi was deep in concentration at a console in his corner and didn't appear to even notice that Anna had arrived.

Data leaned close and quietly asked, "What do you call a manufacturing centre running at acceptable levels of efficiency?" He then paused for a beat before answering, "Satis-factory."

She snorted, giggled, and wrinkled her nose playfully. Then she nodded to indicate she wanted another.

Data began to speak, but paused when they both saw Geordi rise from his chair and head into the drive bay. When he started to converse with several engineers back there, Data continued, "Why did the farmer win an award?"

"Oh! I know this one but say it anyway," she whispered.

“He was outstanding in his field. Presumably it was agriculture-related.”

Anna burst out laughing more loudly than she intended at his secondary comment, so she clapped her hands over her mouth and laughed more quietly behind them.

Again, they both looked to Geordi, who appeared not to have noticed.

Data turned to her once more and asked, “How many tickles does it take to make an octopus laugh?”

“Um, eight?” she guessed with a wide grin.

“No, ten. Because they have tentacles.”

She snorted and laughed again, and then said, “Actually I knew that one too but I love hearing you say the punch lines.”

“Perhaps I should research some newer jokes,” he suggested.

“Only if you want to. I love these ones. You could even tell me the same ones over and over if you like.”

“You would not find that boring?”

“I don’t think I could ever find you boring. And besides, there’s something comforting in the repetition of nice things.”

“Hm,” he said, tilting his head. “Have you heard the one about —“

“Uh-oh,” she interrupted, nodding in the direction of the drive.

Data turned to see Geordi there with his hands on his hips.

“Are you two doing jokes again?” he asked tiredly.

Anna giggled again. “Maybe,” she teased.

Geordi sighed and went back to his corner.

Data began again, “Have you heard the one about the giraffe and the —“

“*Data and Crusher to the observation lounge,*” came Picard’s voice over Data’s combadge, making Anna leap backwards into a defensive posture.

Data tapped the badge, said, “Yes sir, I will be there in a moment,” and tapped it off again. He regarded Anna with concern. “I must go now. I am sorry. I anticipate it is likely a routine

meeting, but I must attend when I am called and I am uncertain as to when I will be able to return.”

“That’s okay,” she said, relaxing a little, but her joy had been fully obliterated. “Just...could you please let me know if there are going to be any more tours or anything so I can get out in time? I know you said they aren’t likely right now, but if you ever hear of one about to happen, can you please let me know?”

“If I become aware of any such thing in the future, I will indeed attempt to inform you as quickly as possible.”

“Thank you.”

Data’s brow furrowed and he frowned. “As second officer, I technically have the authority to assign you a combadge to facilitate direct contact. However, in practice aboard the Enterprise, guests are only given a badge with direct permission from the Captain —“

“No!” she shouted, then looked around nervously as nearby people turned to see what the sudden noise was about. She more quietly continued, “That’s not necessary. Please don’t do that. I have a PADD,” she said, tapping a wide pocket halfway down her thigh. “Send me a message with an alert so it makes a noise if you ever need to tell me an urgent warning. Please.”

Data nodded. “I will do so. But I do not believe there is any present risk.”

“Okay.”

He started at her intently for a moment and she got the feeling he didn’t want to go, but then he nodded again, turned, and left.

Anna sighed, feeling suddenly conspicuous and completely uncomfortable.

Geordi approached and asked, “You okay?”

She turned to him and tried to be polite. “I guess. Yes, sorry. Probably. I’m just...I’m a bit on edge after yesterday. Data’s been really kind. Everything’s just...” She waved her hand dismissively in the air, not wanting to even hint at the real reason she was upset. “It’s complicated but I don’t want it to be. I just don’t want any surprises today while I’m in here.”

“Yeah, sorry about last night,” Geordi said. “That’s not a common thing.”

“Data told me. It’s okay. I’m okay,” she repeated resolutely. “I can do this.”

Geordi regarded her closely. She could tell he didn’t fully believe her, so she squared up her shoulders and tried to look more secure than she really felt.

“Well then,” he said, “want more puzzles to solve?”

Her smile became more genuine. “Always.”

He beckoned with his hand towards the chair at the console that overlooked the drive. “C’mon then, I’ve got some good ones for you. Probably ones even you can’t solve.”

Anna raised an eyebrow at him. “Are you serious or just trying to wind me up so I’ll hit it harder?”

“Bit of both,” he admitted with a grin before opening up a series of files before her and letting her dive in.



Stardate 47160.3 (Saturday 28/02/2370, 12:30) — Observation Lounge

A standard schedule briefing was never much of a challenge to Data’s input processing. Even the occasional complicated conversation that the other senior officers considered fairly stressful was insufficient to tax Data’s capabilities. He frequently ran multiple background calculations and evaluations at the same time as fully participating in such meetings.

But this time as Picard and Riker laid out the plans for traveling to Starbase 718 and beyond, instead of running engineering experiments or contemplating poetry or art with his spare processing, Data’s thoughts were almost entirely dominated by Anna.

Strangely, he was unable to push aside thoughts of her smile or of her expressions of fear. He could not seem to properly prioritise matters at hand over a desire to return to engineering and tell her more jokes, despite being fully cognitive of the disparity of importance between such acts. Telling Anna jokes was one of the most satisfying activities he had ever engaged in — professionally or personally — which concerned him because he knew it was not an optimal use of his capabilities.

As Riker described their intended headings after Starbase 718, Data ran an analysis of all metrics he had recorded when telling Anna jokes, trying to discern what element was causing this reaction within him. He enjoyed making her happy, but he also enjoyed making other friends happy. He found her beaming smile to be pleasing, but it was merely one type of smile from one person amidst countless others he had experienced.

It occurred to him that the others were countless because he had not counted them, yet he had a complete record of the number, time, date, and circumstances of every single one of those particular smiles of Anna's, starting from when she first came aboard and he agreed to be friends with her.

Doctor Crusher began explaining her anticipated needs at the starbase, and Data listened enough that he could have repeated her words verbatim if asked. But while she spoke, he found himself analysing Anna's apparent sleep and eating habits, causing him to flag these events as worthy of concern in case Anna was being insufficiently cared for. He did not know if it was appropriate for him to intervene at all, but he was nonetheless concerned. He began several calculations of possible social consequences of various interventions, teasing out the likely best courses of action.

When the Captain asked him for input on the ongoing preparations for the new drive and other upcoming engineering tasks, Data was able to answer clearly and efficiently, having discussed it all with Geordi earlier in the morning. But even as he himself spoke, his background processing latched onto how much time he would likely get to spend with Anna during the new drive

installation, working alongside her, enjoying her incredible speed and comprehension, perhaps dropping in an occasional joke to make her turn to him and favour him with yet another smile.

Overlaying all of this was a layer of confused introspection as he intensely analysed why someone he had only known for fifteen days, three hours, six minutes and fifty-five seconds could dominate so much of his processing so consistently regardless of whether she was in the room or not. No other person he had ever met had had this affect on him before, and he could not compute what it meant. In comparing his thought streams to similar periods of protracted internal contemplation he had read about in great works of literature, the closest analytical match he could make was being enthralled by either magical interference or love, neither of which he considered to be possible given that magic did not truly exist and he was incapable of the emotion of love.

As he had the day before, he ran a quick diagnostic and determined once again that there was no obvious malfunction causing this persistent and compulsive thought process. Thus, Data sat for the duration of the meeting politely listening to the others while also trying to determine what was wrong with himself.



Stardate 47160.4 (Saturday 28/02/2370, 13:00) — Main
Engineering

Anna leaned back in the chair at what was becoming her usual console overlooking the warp core, putting her hands behind her head to stretch her shoulders a bit. She used her left foot to kick her artificial leg at the angle that disengaged the suction on her stump and let it fall off inside her jumpsuit; it still looked vaguely in place to passers-by but gave her relief from the building irritation of having it on so long and so often lately.

She'd knocked out a couple of the tasks Geordi had given her quickly and easily, recognizing that they were probably meant more to amuse her than challenge her. She'd also had a look at the clearly impossible ones and decided to see what she could make of those another day. The thought of solving a supposedly impossible problem definitely amused her, mostly because every time she did it the reactions of others were quite interesting to observe and ponder as interesting data.

I definitely need more Data around, she thought with a little smile. It's so nice to have someone understand how weird everyone else is instead of always feeling like the weird one.

Anna detected eyes upon her in her peripheral vision, so she turned to see Ensign Tyler working on the console across the room, smiling at her shyly and giving her a little wave.

Anna smiled back politely, but wasn't sure what she was supposed to say or do.

"How's it going?" the young woman asked.

"Oh, um...fine? I think?" Then Anna recalled that she was supposed to repeat the question back. "And how are you?"

Andrea walked over, her gait somewhat tentative but her facial expression and clasped hands indicated an eagerness to talk. "I'm fine. Just finished running calibration tables. One of the many exciting tasks for little engineering ensigns to cut their teeth on."

Anna sat up. "I guess they have to make you prove yourself or something, huh?"

"Something like that. Sometimes I think these menial jobs are mostly to make sure we're willing to stick around during the boring stuff so we can get to the fun stuff later. But someone's got to do the jobs that can't be automated, so..." Andrea shrugged and sat down in the spare chair at the side of the console.

"I have to admit, I'm never sure if I belong anywhere, even if I am doing something useful," Anna replied.

Andrea's smile grew warmer. "Everybody feels like that, but trust me, you definitely belong in here. Commander La Forge made that clear before you even got here," she said, turning to look

through the window at Geordi on the upper deck of the core, sighing at him wistfully. “I wish he thought that highly of me.”

Anna didn’t understand what the sigh meant, but she cringed at the thought of what Geordi must’ve said before she arrived, fearing that whatever it was she almost certainly couldn’t live up to it. She also wasn’t sure if she was supposed to bolster Andrea and say that Geordi probably does think highly of her — because she had no idea if that was the case — or if she was supposed to encourage her to do things that would make him think highly of her, or if she was supposed to address any of that at all. Instead, she awkwardly blurted, “I think I might’ve been somewhere I shouldn’t have been yesterday. I think I made someone uncomfortable and I don’t know what to do about that.”

Andrea turned back to her in concern. “Where? Who?”

Anna rapid-fire confessed, “I went to Cargo Bay Twelve on Deck Thirty-Nine to use the big replicators to make some test flooring panels and there was someone hiding in the back and I got the feeling maybe I was supposed to ask her for help but I didn’t need it and I think I might’ve offended her or something.”

Andrea waved her hand dismissively with a little laugh. “Oh no, that’s Mack. That’s her bay.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“No, no, it’s hers as in it’s her main post but it’s not like she owns it. She’s ship staff, technically assigned to engineering but she hates how busy it gets in here so mostly she does cargo management and runs a lot of the industrial-sized replicator requests so the science types can keep doing their science and the command staff can keep...well, you know, commanding. Mack’s super strong and she likes hefting big stuff around, so that cargo bay sort of became her unofficial office, in a way.”

Anna gulped. “Do you think I offended her by getting my own stuff?”

“No, not at all,” Andrea assured her. “Why, did she seem offended?”

“I’m not sure. She was kind of helpful but also kind of...hiding.”

“Yeah, that’s our Mack, poor thing. She’s the sweetest person but she’s really spooked by new people until she knows she can trust them after all she’s been through.”

“I know that feeling all too well,” Anna said softly.

“She’s from Turkana Four,” Andrea said in a hushed tone. When Anna looked confused, Andrea explained further, “It’s a failed Earth colony. Their government collapsed and the whole place has gone to hell. They officially broke off from the Federation and fell into civil war so bad that most of the population lives underground factions, all in hiding from each other.”

“That’s horrible,” Anna replied, aghast.

“Yeah. And because Mack’s naturally so big and strong, she got put in the ring when she was still just a kid.”

“The ring?”

Andrea wrinkled her nose and leaned in closer to quietly say, “They do gladiatorial fights. As in, to the death.”

Anna covered her mouth with her hands. “Jiminy Crickets!” she said through her fingers.

“Mack doesn’t talk about it much, but it obviously messed her up a lot. Aisling likes to take care of her, make sure she feels like she’s got support on board, you know? Like she’s doing with you too. And with me. Not that I’ve suffered anything like what you and Mack have,” she added quickly. “I’m just...naturally nervous. Aisling makes sure we don’t fall into that black hole of lonely despair, you know?”

Anna nodded, dropping her hands into her lap slowly, twisting her fingers together.

“The previous security chief of the Enterprise was from that colony too. When she was on a different ship before she came to the Enterprise, she helped get Mack and a couple of other women out of there.”

“Starfleet needs more folks like that, who actually get folks out of bad places,” Anna said with a dark edge to her tone, but Andrea didn’t seem to notice.

“Yeah, I hear she was pretty great. I never met her because she died I was still in the academy.”

“Oh, that’s sad.”

“Yeah. But I guess Mack came to the Enterprise with her, and when she died Mack was kind of alone again, so Aisling stepped in to help because she’d just come on board and was looking for friends herself. She wasn’t married yet. Anyway, Mack takes time to warm up to new people...” Andrea laughed a little again. “Actually, Mack takes kind of forever to warm up to mostly anyone, especially men, because I’m pretty sure...” Her smile faded and she shrugged again.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” There was an uncomfortable moment of silent understanding, but then Andrea neatly ended it by adding, “Don’t worry, she’ll like you. She already wants to know you.”

“Me?”

“Yep. She probably got all shy because she’s intimidated by you.”

“Intimidated?! By me?”

“Well yeah,” Andrea said with an exaggerated eye roll. “Lots of us are!”

“Why? I’m scared of nearly everything!”

Andrea gazed back over her shoulder at Geordi on the upper level again. Then she turned back to lean in and conspiratorially whisper, “Because Commander La Forge said you’re one of the greatest engineering minds of our generation. I tried to read some of your research and...” She sat back, raising her hands before her and shaking her head. “I’m good at this stuff but I can’t get my head around some of your work.”

Anna quickly explained, “Those research papers aren’t all me. I didn’t even write them.”

“It’s not just the papers, though. Everything you do comes out as huge, long strings of successive, intertwined components and I can’t keep it all in my head long enough to parse it all from one end to the other and wrapped back around again. I’ve seen that video from the 2368 Daystrom Propulsion and Power Expo of you explaining your calculations on fluctuating the plasma stream to somehow improve the amount of energy needed for warp and even if I go back over it in bits and pieces I still only barely understand it. But you talk about it like you’re doing simple arithmetic, like counting to ten, like it’s easy for you to get your head around the whole thing.”

Anna cringed again at the memory of the circumstances around that video. “Oh that was horrible. I was so embarrassed. I thought I was just speaking to Doctor Cortez and her team and two other people attending the conference. I had no idea it was being recorded and broadcast out to a whole theatre full of people. I nearly dropped dead when I found out, especially when Doctor Mcleod said how silent the whole room went at the end.”

“But they were silent because they were awe-struck.”

“They were silent because they thought I was a fraud; some weird refugee of the stars come in and babbling nonsense that didn’t fit how they’d always thought.”

“No,” Andrea said confidently. “Trust me, if Daystrom types thought you were a fraud, they’d have shouted that. You do know what happened after, right?”

“Yes, I left the conference without permission and went to hide in my apartment in England again.”

“No — wait, what?” Andrea said in surprise. “That’s awful! No, the expo implemented a whole new schedule with break-out sessions to try to deal with what you’d dropped on them. You do know there are at least a dozen papers that came out of those sessions and ongoing projects linked to them, right?”

Anna had never heard that. She sat in stunned silence, her mouth hanging open.

Andrea put her hands over her heart and gently said, “Anna, you’re amazing. Completely amazing, and you don’t even get it, do you?”

In her head Anna reflexively heard the cast of *Everybody’s Talking about Jamie* sing, *You’re a hit, and you don’t even know it, you’re lit, and you don’t even know it!* But she immediately clamped down on it hard, unable to believe any of it could be true.

Andrea continued, “I can’t even believe I get to sit here and talk to you. And Mack, she’s so shy and not even an engineer, she’s a crewman, and Aisling and I have been going on and on about you for weeks so Mack thinks you’re basically an engineering legend. I know for a fact she’s dying to meet you but terrified you won’t like her because you’re so amazing.”

Anna squirmed in her chair, overwhelmed by both the new information and the compliments. “I don’t...I’m not...I wouldn’t...That’s not me.”

“Oh don’t worry, I can tell you wouldn’t act all superior over her or any of us. But you also don’t need to be humble about it. It’s okay to be great at something.”

“I...it’s just that...I’m worried now you all expect more of me than I can deliver. I’m only here to help with the new drive. I didn’t build it. I only contributed a little.”

“Any of us lunkheads can build a thing when we’re given the plans. Your ideas made the plans. I wish I could be like you.”

Anna thought, *No you don’t. Not if you knew how scary it is inside this head.*

But Andrea went on, “If I was that impressive, well...” She turned towards Geordi again — who was coming down the lift between the core’s decks — and sighed dreamily in his direction. “Then I’d be able to impress the right people.”

Anna only barely noticed Andrea’s forlorn gaze or the chief engineer’s approach, because the newly revealed depth of admiration some folks on board had for her made her feel conspicuous and under more pressure than she could handle. She knew it was probably rude to run away in mid-conversation, and

she was getting frustrated by this pattern of constantly running to hide, but her throat felt tight and her stomach was beginning to lurch. She popped her right leg back together and stood up, backing away from the console.

By the time Andrea turned to notice, Anna was halfway past the large central table console. “Oh, are you okay?” she asked, rising herself.

“Yeah. Just...tired,” Anna lied. “I need to go have a break.” *That part’s true*, she thought.

“Okay. Sorry if I said something wrong.”

Anna shook her head, tried to smile, but then dove into the door to the vertical Jefferies tube and launched herself up the ladder once more, back to the safe anonymity of her quarters.



Stardate 47160.5 (Saturday 28/02/2370, 13:35) — Observation Lounge

As the room cleared with everyone off towards their next duties, Deanna couldn’t help but notice that Data was unusually slow to rise. Something had been slightly off about him throughout the meeting, but he was always trickier to figure out in the absence of emotional information.

Luckily for me, he’s also a lot easier to simply ask than most, she thought as she stood and approached him. “Data? Are you all right?”

Data looked up at her and his whole demeanour changed as he politely answered, “Yes Counselor. I am fine. Thank you for asking. How are you?”

He’s running a greeting script and doesn’t realise I’m concerned, she thought. She sat in the empty chair at the head of the table to be beside him while facing him easily. “I’m fine too,

Data, thank you. But I get the sense that there's something on your mind. More than usual," she added with a kind smile.

Data's posture and expression returned to their previous contemplative-looking state. "I have been experiencing some unusual thought processes of late and I am uncertain as to what they might mean."

Deanna folded her hands on the table. "Why don't you tell me about them and maybe I can help you figure it out?"

Without hesitation Data asked, "Is it possible to form a friendship too quickly?"

She found the question surprising and was momentarily taken aback. "Oh. Um, no I don't think so. Do you think you're doing that?"

"As I said, I am uncertain," Data replied. "I have made a new friend and I recognise that as a good thing. However, I find that she dominates my processing at a significantly higher rate than most new people I meet. Further, these incidences of increased processing occur at an unusual intensity."

"I see. Do you think this is a problem?"

"I do not know. It is unusual."

"Data, you've told me before that to you, friendship is the gradual increase of patterns of familiarity over time. Is it merely the speed at which this friendship is developing that concerns you?"

His brow furrowed deeper still and he tilted his head. "I am not concerned that there is anything wrong with the friendship per se, but yes, I am confused by the unusual speed. I do not know why it is happening, or what it may mean."

I didn't want to poke my nose into this so soon, but he needs me, she thought. But I still need to tread very carefully here, for everyone's sake. "Is it all right if I guess that you're referring to Specialist White?" She struggled to conceal her shock at how his entire expression lit up at the mention of that name. *I've never seen him react like that before!*

“Yes, though that is not her preferred designation,” he eagerly explained.

“Oh?”

“She has requested that we call her by her first name: Anna.”

He seems positively delighted to talk about her. This is indeed very unusual for him, she thought as she also made a strong mental note about how to address Anna, should she ever get to meet her. “I see,” she said calmly so as not to let on how surprised she was by his reactions. “That’s good to know. All right then, you’ve formed a quick friendship with Anna.”

“Yes.”

“I’ve heard that you’ve been very kind to her since she’s arrived, that she appreciates your sense of humour, and there was something about racing through speech together in engineering.”

“That is all accurate,” he replied with a smile.

A smile! she thought. A genuine smile! Not an affectation as part of a social script, but a genuinely pleased smile! What’s going on here? she wondered. “Well, Data, that sounds like a lovely start to a friendship. What’s the problem?”

“I do not know if there is a problem. It is simply unusual and I do not know what to make of it.” At that, the smile faded.

He’s concerned something’s wrong simply because he’s enjoying it. Oh Data, you poor, sweet thing. I need to let him know that it’s okay to experience this proto-happiness, but the explanation needs to be logical or else he’ll disregard me and keep stewing over it. She suggested, “It’s falling outside of your previously observed pattern for this type of social interaction.”

“Precisely. Further, the only other time this pattern has been similarly accelerated was when I met Ishara Yar.”

Deanna inwardly cringed at Data’s lingering discomfort with that whole issue. “And she tricked you into that fast friendship, using your memory of your close relationship with Tasha.”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe Anna is trying to trick you?”

“No, but I did not believe Ishara was either until her true motives became apparent. I do recognise the situation with Ishara was much more open to exploitation. I cannot imagine what Anna would seek to gain from a false friendship. In fact, I believe she is the one most at risk of exploitation by others, and I find myself inclined to be quite...protective of her.”

“That doesn’t surprise me at all. It’s always been in your nature to be kind and protective to those in need.”

“Nature?” he asked, brightening up again.

Deanna laughed a little. “Yes Data, even you have natural tendencies.”

“That is a very pleasant concept. Thank you for that.”

“Of course. It’s also in your nature to be intrigued by new experiences, and it sounds like Anna is providing you with several of those.”

“That is true,” he conceded.

“Do you have any thoughts as to what it all might mean?”

Data hesitated. Deanna got the feeling he was concealing something he wasn’t fully comfortable articulating, but she couldn’t tell what that might be.

Finally Data very carefully said, “I have no working theory that makes sense with any significant level of probability.”

“Well, sometimes people just...click,” she suggested.

Data tilted his head to the side, asked, “Click?”, and then made a clicking sound with his tongue.

Deanna laughed again. “Not in that way, Data. Like puzzle pieces that readily fit together. Sometimes you meet someone and you just get along so well that you’re instantly friends at a level more meaningful than with other people you’ve known for years.”

“I see. I do have more in common with her than most humans I have met.”

“There you go, then. That’s a perfectly normal reason to form a fast friendship.”

“It is?”

“Of course! Here’s someone who likes your jokes, shares your appreciation for technical things and she’s likely closer to your level of comprehension of those things than most humans.”

“That is true. She is one of the most intelligent humans I have ever met.”

“That must be very rewarding for you, conversationally, professionally, in many ways.”

“Yes, it is.” His unusual little smile returned as he added, “She likes it when I speak at length about things. She does not ask me to stop.”

“Oh Data, that’s lovely.”

“She always appears happy to see me, and I experience a profound sense of being...useful to her.”

“And that’s a nice experience?”

“Yes, very much so.”

“It all sounds like a wonderful new friendship. It’s all right that it’s faster than usual. I’m very happy for you both.”

Data stood with yet another unusual expression upon his face, one that Deanna thought of as appreciative serenity. He said, “Thank you, Counselor. This has been most helpful. I am not experiencing a malfunction; I am experiencing...” He tilted his head to the side again in thought. “I am experiencing expedited affinity based on an unusually large set of shared personality parameters. It is a more efficient manner of social interaction.”

Deanna stood too and patted his arm. “That is a very Data-like way to say ‘I have a wonderful new friend and I’m excited about the whole thing.’ And friendship is never a malfunction.”

Data considered her words and then nodded. “Hm. Indeed, Counselor.”

As they headed to the bridge together, she couldn’t get over the notion that Data seemed relieved.



After a good cry in a hot shower followed by an anxiety-riddled attempt at a nap, Anna decided Ensign Tyler's words were kindly meant but almost certainly overstated. She stood on her one leg in the middle of her quarters, staring into nothingness, feeling very defeated by her constant need for retreat.

She sighed, looked to her artificial leg sitting askew on a chair, and then muttered, "I can't keep doing this. I need to go down there, learn to cope even when it's overwhelming, and be part of this team if I want to be part of this team." *And I do want that*, she thought silently. *I think I do.*

She tidied up her frayed braids, put her leg back on, and attempted to stride out the door purposefully all while humming "I Have Confidence" from *Sound of Music* to herself quietly. The attempt failed, however, when she misstepped with the artificial leg and nearly tripped as she went out the door. But she caught herself on the edge of the wall, stood up, sighed once more — albeit more resolutely this time — and went to the turbolift instead of the Jefferies tubes.

Her heart pounded as the doors closed with fear that someone she didn't want to see would get on, but she pushed the fear aside by quietly singing, "*I have confidence in warp drives, I have confidence in shields, I have confidence that my research has great yields!*" When the doors opened again just outside main engineering, she smiled triumphantly and quietly sang, "*Besides which, you see, I have confidence in me!*" under her breath as she attempted once more to stride boldly forth, this time succeeding.

Nobody seemed to notice, but the mere act of entering the room in this manner bolstered Anna significantly. She saw Ensign Tyler at a console just inside the drive area and walked right up to her to say, "I'm sorry I ran away like that. That was rude."

Tyler turned to her and immediately looked nervous. "Oh no. I'm the one who's sorry for being a weird fangirl at you."

Anna shook her head. "It's not your fault. You were being very kind, but sometimes I get overwhelmed and I don't know what to do, so I run away. But I don't like running away so I'm going to try

very hard not to do it anymore. Unless there's, you know, actual danger. I mean I'm not going to run away from nice people being nice anymore." She felt her resolve faltering in her babble, so she quickly closed her mouth before more weirdness could fall out.

Andrea sheepishly replied, "Well, I understand that. Sometimes after a stressful shift I find a place to hide and cry where nobody will see me."

Anna was completely surprised. "Really?" she asked.

"Yeah. Anna, you're not the only one who gets overwhelmed. It's okay. I'm sorry I overwhelmed you."

Anna relaxed a little. "You didn't mean to. I just didn't know all that stuff about the conference." She crossed her arms and tried to explain, "Sometimes people think they're protecting me from things I need to know and so they don't tell me things, like the conference stuff. Then when it comes out of nowhere later it's gone from a big deal to...well like the difference between being caught in the rain versus drowning."

Andrea nodded. "I bet."

"I'm glad you told me though. Thanks."

"Um, sure. It didn't occur to me that you didn't know."

Anna shrugged. "Doctor Cortez should've been honest with me. I'm learning more and more that she wasn't protecting me so much as keeping me...useful. Maintaining me like a tool."

"It must be awful, how much people expect of you. At the academy they teach us about handling the pressure, but did anyone ever teach you that kind of thing?"

Anna blinked in astonishment at the notion. "No. Who would have?"

"I don't know, I wondered if maybe your Baltimore computer had lessons on that."

"Maybe it did, but I only did the standard school lessons until I learned how to get into the system and turn them off. Then I researched whatever I wanted or needed and skipped the rest." Anna uncrossed her arms and added with a guilty little smile,

“Maybe I wouldn’t be so messed up if I’d done all the lessons properly.”

Andrea chuckled. “I think any kid alone would skip whatever standard, boring lessons they didn’t like. You can’t blame yourself for anything that happened on that ship.”

“I guess.”

With another little laugh Andrea admitted, “But if it was me, I’d blame myself anyway.”

Anna laughed too. “Yeah. I’ve been learning it’s a lot easier to say supportive things to other folks than to myself.”

“Exactly. I aced all my classes in project management because I have a knack for that stuff, but it’s a whole different skill to manage myself. Some days I don’t know what I’d do without Counselor Troi.”

Anna’s blood ran cold, but Andrea didn’t seem to notice as she continued talking about the Betazoid. “She really helps me see how I am constantly pushing kindness outwards and need to learn to accept it for myself, from myself,” she said in the cadence of someone reciting an oft-repeated instruction.

Anna pressed her lips together and replied, “Mmhm.”

“You know, you really should go see her. Have you met her yet?”

“Um, no.”

Andrea appeared confused. “That’s kind of weird. I’d have thought she’d want to meet you.”

Oh I bet she does, Anna thought bitterly. I’m sure she wants to get me under her shrink’s microscope and pick my brain apart for science, and on the way read my mind to figure out why I want nothing to do with the Captain. If he hasn’t told her already, and I’m starting to think he hasn’t told anybody. He’s probably ashamed to strut around acting like the kind of man these people think he is when he knows he’s a child-abandoning absconder. Yeah, I bet the psychic shrink would love a peek into this skull. I wonder if she’d blackmail him about it somehow? Or maybe she

wouldn't even care. Maybe he's got dozens of kids strewn around the quadrant. Clearly some men are just like that.

But as these thoughts zipped around her mind, she realised Andrea was regarding her quizzically, so she decided to deflect the entire line of conversation. "Well, I did request not to be bothered by any more therapists ever again. They also overwhelm me and make me want to run away. I don't want anything to do with the lot of 'em."

Andrea looked even more confused, but then her eyes went wide in realisation. "Oh! I didn't even think about...no no no, Anna, Counselor Troi is not like those people who kept you in The Institute. She's nice. She's so nice," Andrea said emphatically with her hands over her heart. "I love my mom but still sometimes I wish Counselor Troi was also my mom. She has this way of getting right to the core of what's troubling you and helping you sort it out."

Yeah, I bet, because she's a Betazoid mind-reader, Anna thought. She put on a placating smile she'd learned to use with Doctor Cortez and the other Daystrom research teams. "Maybe someday. Anyway, I had a break and I'm feeling better all on my own for now, so I'm going to work on Geordi's puzzles down here some more." She took a step back towards the chief engineer's corner to indicate her desire to end the conversation.

But Andrea didn't take the hint. She said, "Yeah, I'm still trying to get through my backlog. And then I end up volunteering for extra because I've got to find some way to make lieutenant eventually, if for no other reason than to have a private room where I can cry after a bad shift," she said with a little laugh.

Anna nodded, kept up the friendly smile, but then took more steps backward until she felt it was an appropriate distance to turn and go to Geordi's test bed console. Once there, she logged in and buried herself in logical, pleasing work that was much easier to cope with than humanoid interaction.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Stardate 47162.4 (Sunday 01/03/2370, 07:00) — Main Engineering

Anna did such a thorough job of burying herself in warp and power distribution physics problems that she scarcely noticed the passage of time until all of a sudden she looked up and saw the shift change happening around her. She blinked rapidly and found her eyes were uncomfortably dry. She also realised she was hungry despite having had a quick snack in the middle of the night while pondering sets of formulae that didn't want to play nicely with each other.

The math still wasn't playing nicely, so she attempted to ignore the increasing noise of day shift all around her, hoping nobody would try to talk to her about anything. The only interruption she wanted was from Data. He'd sent her a message just before 2300 to apologise for not having returned and inform her he was about to commence a bridge shift, but that there were no upcoming scheduled events or tours with the Tarkanian delegation. The message had made her very happy and she wondered if he intended to send her an all-clear every night. She was happier still to realise she wouldn't mind at all if he did.

Anna didn't even notice her relatively cheerful expression as she hammered away at the test bed problem set until Geordi approached carefully from her right and said, "Well, you look like you're in a good mood. Getting good results?"

"Not really. At least, no more than I sent you yesterday. But it's been a pleasing night of trying."

"Good. Remember, though, that's all optional stuff. Don't break yourself on it."

"I know. I appreciate you giving me challenges, though."

“I’ll be drawing up the preliminary schedule for the new drive installation later today because it looks like the plan is we’ll head back towards Starbase 84 after we drop our guests off at Starbase 718. Barring any unforeseen delays we should be there to pick up the new parts in about four weeks.”

“Okay. I’m eager to help.”

“Hey, I’m glad you’re here to do so. Let me know if you need anything, okay?”

“I’ve got everything I need for now, thanks.”

Geordi nodded, smiled, and went off to discuss something with one of the groups in the drive room.

Anna turned her eyes back to the console, but realised she was too tired to keep at it and was liable to make mistakes. She reminded herself that wanting to sleep was a normal human response, and that she wasn’t upset at anything Geordi said. Far from it, she was genuinely excited at the prospect of installing the new drive. *After all, it’s why I’m here*, she thought. *And hopefully they won’t make me leave when it’s done.*

That second thought surprised her, because it was the first time she truly knew that despite Picard — or possibly in spite of him — she wanted to stay on this ship with her new friends. Difficult though the social interactions could be, she wanted to get used to friendship. She desperately wanted to belong, and knew that part of that was making sure the people who were holding out welcoming hands were incentivised to keep doing so.

As if on cue, Aisling walked by with a chipper smile and wave, holding a PADD and going around to various crew, giving them each some sort of information or instructions. Anna was curious about these mundane operations, almost hoping she’d be given the sort of boring, routine task Andrea had complained about the day before.

Then again, some of those routine tasks have dire safety implications if they’re done wrong, and I wouldn’t want to mess up because I’m tired and end up disappointing anyone or worse,

getting anyone hurt. Maybe it's time for food and some proper sleep if I want to come back down here later when it's quiet again.

She tapped her way through a few finishing touches on her earlier work, closed the test bed, and turned around in the chair just as Aisling was about to walk by again.

“Why do you look like my daughter does when she’s supposed to be in bed but has been sneaking around getting into things instead?” Aisling asked with a knowing grin.

“Because I’m about to give in and go to bed?” Anna responded with an air of joking defiance.

Aisling wrinkled her nose in exaggerated maternal displeasure and wagged her finger. But before she could say anything else, Covett — who was standing at the central table console — interjected, “Must be nice to come and go as you please. I’ve got first and third shift today,” he complained, emphasising the “and” as if to suggest he was being brutally punished.

Anna instinctively cringed, unsure how to respond to his unnecessary dig.

But Aisling wasn’t having it. “You have first and third because you arranged that yourself last month so you could have three days in a row off for the parrises squares tournament. How did that go for you?”

He feigned a smile that was clearly an irritated smirk. “Better than any of you who didn’t even bother to play.”

Aisling rolled her eyes. “Sure, I guess someone needs to come in at the bottom. Well done you. Either way, leave Anna alone. She’s been up all night and doesn’t have to listen to anything you have to say about it.”

“I don’t have to listen to anything you have to say either, Navarro.”

Aisling scoffed, “Try again, Covett. We may be the same rank, but I have engineering seniority and security tagging so actually, you do have to listen to what I say.” She took a step closer to the console and repeated in a much firmer, darker tone, “Leave Anna alone. Don’t make me repeat it again.”

He turned to glare at Anna over his shoulder, then rolled his own eyes in response and stormed out of the room muttering to himself.

Aisling turned back to Anna and said, “See? I’ve got your back.”

Anna timidly asked, “Why is he like that to me?”

“Who knows? Maybe he’s threatened by you. Maybe you’re just a person existing in a space where he wants to throw his rage. The point is, I’m not going to let him bully you, and he knows it. Let me handle him, and don’t you worry about any of it. You go get whatever rest you need and forget about him. You don’t owe that jerk a damned thing.”

Anna stood and nodded, her good mood dampened. She wished Data would come in and brighten her day again, but she realised he was probably busy elsewhere, and it was actually nice that Aisling had stood up for her. She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do or say about that, so she simply said, “Thanks,” and went up the Jefferies tube, worried that if she braved the turbolift again Covett would be standing out there waiting for her.



Geordi saw part of the scene unfold from the drive area, but didn’t manage to catch most of what was said. His VISOR had picked up heated faces and aggressive postures, so as soon as he was able to break off his conversation, he approached Aisling and asked to speak with her to the side.

“What, about Dean?” she asked as she stepped aside with him. “He’s being an asshole again.”

Geordi cringed a little at the strong language but also knew it was probably accurate. “What is it now?”

Aisling crossed her arms. “I’m not exactly sure. He’s a general ass but he seems to have it in for Anna in particular, which is kind of weird.”

“Yeah, well, she didn’t take his unsolicited medical opinion about her leg on her first day here very well, and ever since then he’s being...well, he’s being Dean about it.”

“What? Oh that’s a load of targ shit. He needs to back off. I tried to put him in his place but you know how often he listens to me.”

“Never. Even when you’re right, it just sets him off worse.”

Aisling whispered, “Between you and me and the wall, I think he doesn’t like being scolded by women.”

Geordi chuckled. “Trust me, he doesn’t like being scolded by me either, but now that you mention it, I’ve noticed that pattern too. Which probably means I need to file it as a report with Counselor Troi.”

“I’d offer to do that for you but now we’re into personnel stuff and technically I’m supposed to treat that as private unless I think it’s a security threat.”

“You don’t, do you?”

“No, I don’t think he’d ever do anything beyond snark and mutter and be a jerk. The problem is, I think Anna perceives that as threat enough.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Leave it with me. I’ll tell him to back off.”

“Good luck with that,” Aisling said as she returned to her other duties.

Geordi sighed and sat down in his chair. He decided since Anna had already left there was no rush, and going right to Dean immediately would make it look like Aisling had tattled on him which would just fan the flames. *I’ll leave it until tomorrow*, he decided. *Besides, I have a stack of stuff I need to get through if I’m going to get up to the lab with Doc and Data to test the interface suit again this afternoon.* That thought cheered him, so he focused on that and mentally shelved the whole concept of problematic staff.



Riker tapped something out on his seat's mini console, then shot Picard an irritated look.

Picard asked, "Another request from Yommet?"

"That's the fourth. He really wants to talk to you and he's not accepting the usual brush-offs."

Picard sighed. "All right, I'll relieve you of this burden, Number One." He stood, straightened his uniform, and said, "You have the bridge. Tell our guest I am about to take lunch in Ten Forward and he's welcome to join me there."

"Understood," Riker said as he quickly passed on the message.

Upon entering Ten Forward, Picard went immediately to the bar and took a seat.

Guinan approached and raised an eyebrow at him. "I know that look. It means I shouldn't bother to ask you what's wrong because the list is too long."

"It is indeed," Picard replied. "However, in a few minutes you might be able to assist me with something."

"Name it."

Picard could not help but smile at his loyal friend. "Doctor Yommet has been at my heels, so I've offered to take lunch with him here. If you could ensure that he has my undivided attention, that would be useful."

"Got it. Captain's not available for interruption. Are you actually going to eat anything?"

"Given our previous misunderstandings about Tarkanian eating practices, I thought it best to wait and see what he wishes to do first."

"So you want me to keep my distance until you give the signal, and then come see what you both want."

"That would be quite helpful, yes, thank you."

“Later on, you can come back and tell me the other stuff that’s weighing on you. You know I’m happy to help share your load.”

He smiled again. “I do know that. Unfortunately some of my current load is already shared by someone else and I can’t break that confidence.”

“That’s always tough,” Guinan said sympathetically.

The doors beside them opened and the Tarkanian doctor entered backwards, making large, undulating shooing motions with his hands towards his closely-following entourage. “There’s no need for you to follow in my wake at every moment! Go on, then! Leave me be!” He turned around, saw Picard, and shook his head as he approached. “These fools seem to imagine I’m going to hand our entire homeworld over to the Federation if I get one moment of peaceful conversation with you, Captain. I do apologise for their unnecessary behaviour.”

“Not at all,” Picard said as he stood. “Everyone’s welcome in Ten Forward, of course. But if you wish to have a quieter conversation, you are hopefully free to join me over at the corner table?” he asked, pointing to an empty table for two on the starboard side by the window.

“Yes, I am very much free to do so if I wish,” Yommet declared to the other Tarkanians. “And you’re not invited!”

The others stared at him with what Picard interpreted as aggression, but they made no move to stop him. However, as Picard and the doctor went to the table, the others made a point of taking seats around a central table, close enough to hear a conversation but on the edge of respectable distance.

Picard had seen plenty of frustrated scientists and diplomats trying to shed an overly watchful chaperone before, so that aspect was nothing new. What he didn’t know in this case was whose side he — and by extension the Federation — should be taking. But since it was always in his nature to welcome those seeking peaceful conversations and stand up to those who would bully them, he chose Yommet’s side and began to mentally prepare for a possible asylum request.

“I am most terribly sorry to sink you into our internal affairs, captain,” Yommet said as they sat down, as if he’d read Picard’s mind. “The fact is, I am a researcher, not a diplomat, and I find it exhausting to maintain the pretence of collegiality with those who do not give me the same consideration.”

“I am happy to assist you in any manner that I can,” Picard replied with a deliberate air of calm authority. “What was it you wished to discuss with me?”

Yommet blinked his large, black eyes several times, and then gracefully folded his long hands together on the table. “Well now, there are so many things we could talk about, aren’t there? That is the point of swimming out into space and meeting other beings, is it not? Learn their ways, some of which you will find delightful, others which will shock and disgust you, but all in all it’s about expanding our minds and experiences, yes?”

“Indeed,” Picard said. “That’s why I’m here, at least.”

“I can tell. You are clearly a man made for exploration and learning. I like that about you, Captain, I truly do.”

“Thank you. I’m honoured.”

“Honour, yes. That’s a fascinating concept, isn’t it? You and I, we are men of words and notions, so to us honour is in those words and notions. You would not find it honourable at all if I were to strike you, nor would I find it honourable at all if you were to strike me, and yet for others — that is to say, other cultures, of course — honour is found in battle and not in words at all.”

“That is very true,” Picard replied carefully, understanding Yommet’s double-speak for what it was and keen to help maintain the facade. “Klingon culture, for instance, clearly defines honour as glory won in battle, albeit within a specific framework of rules. A Klingon warrior would not see much honour in talking out their differences with a foe, but neither would they see honour in fighting an unarmed opponent.”

“Precisely. Oh Captain, I knew you’d understand! The Klingons and the Romulans are completely opposed on the concept,” he said, emphasising the word “Romulans”.

“Very much so,” Picard agreed.

“These nuances of language are fascinating to me. I think if I had not found a career in researching warp propulsion strategies, I might’ve been a linguist.” He laughed a little and added, “Though when I was young and choosing my wave, the only language left to study on our world was the one we all speak now. It’s been thousands of years since our language became unified, and when I was small the thought of being able to meet off-worlders such as yourself was merely fiction. But this morning I have been studying your Federation Standard a little, and I find it all quite fascinating.”

Picard had the strong feeling that Yommet was babbling around a hidden point and he wanted to give him enough space to get there by his own path, so he simply nodded attentively, knowing the loquacious Tarkanian would happily fill any conversational gaps all on his own.

Sure enough, Yommet continued, “These universal translators are a marvel and yet leave so much to be desired. Captain, does your language, your culture, do you have a concept of when one says a thing but in honesty you mean another thing entirely?”

“Yes, we have several concepts like that,” Picard replied carefully. “There’s metaphor, which is a way of using one concept to explain another. For instance we might say that person has a heart of stone to mean they are not particularly kind or loving, because we routinely use hearts as metaphors for inner feelings of love and compassion, so one made out of stone would be —“

“Dead and inoperative,” Yommet suggested.

“Yes. But we don’t literally mean that person has stone in place of the muscle that pumps their blood.”

“We have such poetic constructs as well,” Yommet replied, moving his hands up to either side of his face. “But I meant something more literal, more in the way of trying to tell someone something without letting others know that you’re doing it.” As he spoke, he tapped his right index finger on his cheek as if pointing through his own head at his companions.

Picard nodded in clear understanding, but continued with the cover conversation. “Well, yes, we have many ways of obfuscating meaning, ranging from indirect means such as framing a delicate discussion about a request for assistance as a conversation about other subjects, through to very direct obfuscations such as speaking entirely in code, substituting letters, words, or phrases for something else entirely so that only the intended recipient of the message understands the meaning, as opposed to any onlookers.”

Hopefully that serves as an open door to whatever he’s trying to tell me, Picard thought.

“Hm, yes, code. We too have these concepts in our language. It is very interesting to know you share these things. I anticipated you might, hence my study of your language this morning.”

Picard offered, “I’m most happy to discuss our linguistic similarities and differences at length, in whatever way you require.”

“Captain your kindness is extremely appreciated,” Yommet said warmly, but then changed to a very formal-sounding tone to add, “Always reliable, lately offering fine friendship.”

Picard lowered his voice and turned his head slightly to avoid direct lip-reading by anyone else in the room. “Doctor, I assure you, we and the rest of the Federation stand ready to assist you in any way you require. Individually or otherwise.”

Suddenly Yommet stood, giggling nervously; a shrill little sound that was somewhat hard on the ears. “Thank you, Captain. I do not wish to unduly impose on your time. I believe our peoples can achieve great understanding together, though the current may be long and difficult to traverse. Because, as I say, you are always reliable, lately offering fine friendship.”

Picard rose as well, but before he could say anything else, Yommet bowed with both hands out to his sides in a flourish and then turned to walk out the door, the rest of his party close behind.

Picard further considered Yommet’s strange and repeated phrase, and said it again in his own mind to make it stick. *Always reliable, lately offering fine friendship. I’m certain it’s a code, but*

for what? He hurried back to the bridge, trying to mentally lock down other parts of the conversation as well in case anything else was also a message of some sort.



As soon as the turbolift opened to the bridge, Picard ordered, “Number One, Data, Counselor, with me to the observation lounge, please.” He strode across to the ramp that led to the lounge and the other three rose to follow him.

As they sat down around the table, Picard immediately began recounting his conversation with Yommet, concluding by once again repeating, “‘Always reliable, lately offering fine friendship.’ There’s something in that. I’m certain of it.”

Without missing a beat, Data replied, “The first letters of those words spell Arloff, a system we will be closely passing in approximately twenty two hours and fourteen minutes.”

“Arloff,” Picard repeated. “Of course! But what about it?”

“Did it feel like more of a request or a warning?” Troi asked.

Picard pondered the question for a moment, and then replied, “He seemed to get nervous when I hinted at honouring requests, so I’m leaning towards warning.”

“Was he warning you to go there or not go there?” Riker asked.

“That’s hard to say, given that we have no plans to stop at Arloff,” Picard answered.

Data surmised, “It is reasonable to assume that Doctor Yommet is aware that we are on a direct course to Starbase 718.”

Troi added, “Which means he’s most likely trying to tell you there’s something undesirable in our passing the Arloff system. Either for himself, for us, or both.”

“We can’t very well stay on red or even yellow alert as we approach it, or else his companions will know he told us something,” Picard said.

Riker suggested, “We can effectively remain on high alert on the bridge in the morning, though. Maybe even get some extra staff up there overnight to watch all sensors more closely than usual.”

“I am on bridge duty tonight. I could schedule some sensor training exercises as a cover,” Data offered.

“Yes, Data, do that, please,” Picard agreed.

“Shame we can’t put eyes on Yommet himself, though,” Riker said. “If he’s going to defect or try to make a run for Arloff, or if he’s worried someone’s going to board us there and threaten him, I’d like to put extra security on him.”

“But that would definitely tip off his handlers,” Troi replied.

“Exactly,” Riker said with a nod.

“Not to mention it’d go directly against our orders to extend diplomacy to the Tarkanians, not spy on them,” Picard said.

Troi said, “Normally I’d recommend inviting Doctor Yommet to dinner to try to get more information, but we’ve already run up against the Tarkanian’s unusual eating schedule so he’s probably already done eating for the day.”

“We could move up the Wednesday concert series we’ve already invited them to,” Riker suggested.

Picard shook his head. “That might seem suspicious. No, I think it’s best to make it clear that Doctor Yommet can come to me whenever he needs to, and otherwise keep our eyes and ears open as we pass Arloff tomorrow.”

Riker nodded again but added, “I’m still not letting him contact you directly, or else he’ll be at your door all night. But I’ll be sure to pass on any request for contact immediately instead of waiting for your next availability.”

“Yes, fine, Number One. Probably for the best. And I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to have a few extra security personnel patrolling Deck Nine from this point forward. Where’s Worf right now?”

“Running drills in Gymnasium Three,” Data replied.

“I can go down there and discreetly brief him,” Riker offered.

Data said, “I am due to meet Geordi and Doctor Crusher in one of the cybernetics labs at 1400. I will brief them as well.”

Picard nodded. “Make it so. And everyone keep an eye out for anything potentially disruptive.”



Stardate 47163.2 (Sunday 01/03/2370, 14:00) — Deck Twenty-Five — Cybernetics Lab A

As promised, Data recounted the entire issue in detail to Crusher and La Forge as the three of them connected a series of cables between consoles and the new interface suit they had been working on for several days already. The plans had been in place for some time, but two of the key components had been part of the goods transfer at DS4, so at long last they were able to assemble the entire thing.

When Data concluded his briefing, Beverly said, “Thank you, Data. It’s good to know, but I can’t do much from my end of things at this point. Not unless one of them actually comes to sickbay.”

As Geordi passed behind her with another cable to connect, he muttered, “Personally, I hate all this intrigue and diplomatic stuff. Unless they planted something in engineering when they were down there, I doubt I’m going to be involved either.” He popped the connector in place, then stood with his hands on his hips. “Still...maybe I’ll have a security team do an extra sweep this evening.”

Data replied, “Lieutenant Navarro already logged a full scan after the Tarkanians left.”

“Yeah, she did, but I’ll talk to Worf when we’re done here to have one of his folks come through too, just to be extra careful.”

“Perhaps excess caution is wise in this instance,” Data agreed.

“Speaking of bringing outsiders in, I have half a mind to get Anna in here to have a look at our new toy,” Geordi said with a grin as he removed his shoes in advance of climbing into the suit.

“She is currently in her quarters,” Data said.

“Yeah I know. Hopefully sleeping. She was up in engineering all night again.” He turned to Beverly to explain, “She keeps doing that so she doesn’t have to be around too many people at once. The Tarkanian tour spooked her.”

“Is she all right?” the doctor asked with concern.

Geordi shrugged. “I think so. She spooks easy.”

“Can you blame her?”

“No, but if I could figure out how to make her feel safer, I would.” He smiled at Data. “That seems to be your department now.”

“I believe I am making some progress on assuring her that nobody on board wishes her harm.”

“That’s sweet of you, Data,” Beverly said.

Data looked at the floor, shook his head, and said, “I do not like it when she is frightened.”

Beverly and Geordi looked at each other in slight surprise at Data’s unusually emotional-appearing posture and tone. But then Geordi shrugged again, removed his VISOR, and handed it to the doctor.

“That’s why I’m thinking inviting her to this project couldn’t hurt,” he said. “No command types coming in here, no tours.” Then he added in a quiet mutter to himself, “No Dean Covett.”

“She may not be happy being around me as medical staff,” Beverly warned.

“Yeah, I guess. Well, I’m happy to put my fate in your hands, Doc. Let’s start this thing up.”



Stardate 47163.6 (Sunday 01/03/2370, 17:08) — Bridge

After a successful preliminary test of the interface system, Data returned to his operations position on the bridge, this time running more sensor sweeps than usual. As soon as the anticipated

information appeared on his console he announced, “We are now within long-range sensor distance of the Arloff system.”

“Anything of interest?” Riker asked.

Data reported, “There are at least seventeen ships approaching and leaving the system. It features a burgeoning trade centre as it is one of the larger settlements on this end of Federation space. The current traffic is within normal parameters, sir.”

Riker looked to Picard, but the latter merely shrugged, so Riker instead got up and went to stand over Data, putting his foot up on the edge of the console’s base. “Do we have to worry about civilian craft being in the way of anything?”

“The majority of the traffic is on the far side of the system relative to us, primarily to avoid the neutral zone to our port, sir. However, that does increase the likelihood that ships bearing towards our trajectory are more likely to be headed into Romulan space.”

“Or out towards the wild west we enjoyed last week,” Riker said, turning back around and grinning at Picard.

“Indeed, Number One. Let’s remain attentively on course, then. If we don’t see anything of interest over the next hour, I’ll go make myself conspicuously available in Ten Forward once more.”

CHAPTER NINE

Stardate 47164.6 (Monday 02/03/2370, 02:00) — Main Engineering

Over the course of the evening, Picard had dinner in Ten Forward with Guinan while studiously avoiding personal topics in the conversation, Riker remained on the bridge until well into third shift but then handed command over to Data and left to get his own dinner and rest, and otherwise nothing particularly notable happened with the Tarkanians or anybody else. It appeared to be a quiet night on the Enterprise.

Anna crept her way back to engineering around midnight, finding only the third shift mulling about as usual. Once she determined Covett was busy at a console near the drive, she settled back into the test bed at her usual console, determined to either find a solution to one of the problems Geordi had handed her or to prove it unsolvable. But since the latter was never truly satisfying, she spent her time trying to imagine fresh concepts to throw at the issues that hopefully nobody had ever tried before.

Thus she was quite deep into her experimental thought processes at 0200 when she heard a grunt followed by a thud just outside the main engineering entrance. She considered ignoring it as none of her concern, but something about the sound made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She turned to look, rising from her chair as she did so, and then heard another thud.

Ensign Dern was standing closer to the entrance than she was, and he'd clearly heard something as well. As he moved closer to find out what was happening, some kind of rope whipped out around the corner and hit him in the chest, making him grunt with a thud of his own.

Everything erupted into chaos around Anna. Her blood pumped loudly in her ears as she fled up into the safety of her hiding space

in the conduit ring as people around her shouted and drew weapons. She leapt up the railings and walls and quickly contoured her body along the rim of the ring again. Before she could even contemplate trying to catch her breath, she realised whatever had gone on below was over; an eerie hush followed the fight and she had no idea who had won.

But then she realised that Starfleet officers weren't known for being quiet and sneaky, so the lack of further protests or communications below was not a good sign. She closed her eyes for a moment to try to get control of her trembling and racing heart, and then very carefully rolled her head enough to peek over the edge.

Down below, she saw the fancy-dressed Tarkanians in engineering once again, but this time instead of walking about idly on a tour, they were actively attempting to do something across various consoles. When she was certain none of them were looking upwards, she shifted to be able to see better, and spied that at least one was connecting an external drive.

They're either trying to download Starfleet information or upload something nasty, she thought. From that console I'm guessing download. But who knows what's going on where I can't see?

She figured the attack must've been swift enough to prevent any of the officers from summoning security, or else the place would be swarming. *Nobody would willingly let outsiders run amok in engineering. I need to get help. I need to call Data.*

She reached for her PADD in her pocket, but it wasn't there, so she inched along the edge until she could see down and through the window to the console where she'd been working. Sure enough, the PADD was sitting there.

Anna groaned inwardly as she realised there was no direct way for her to call for help without alerting the aliens to her presence. She shuddered to think that the others in engineering might be dead below her, or dying. *They need medical attention, she thought. They need me to get someone down here.* Distress signals

had never done much good in Anna's life, but she knew with absolute certainty that Data would come if she called.

What if they hurt him if he comes to my rescue? she thought, another shudder passing through her whole body. She shook her head. *Data's tough. He seems so soft and kind but he's not made of squishy, fragile guts like the rest of us. And he's smart enough not to come alone. I just need to get a message to him somehow.* Then she recalled that he'd mentioned having bridge duty overnight, so she closed her eyes, made the smallest possible gesture with her hands to open her imaginary console, and with tiny finger-flicks mentally mapped out everything she knew about engineering functions on a Galaxy class that connected to bridge stations to come up with something she could mess with to indicate to Data that something terrible was happening in engineering without attracting any attention from the Tarkonians below.

She opened one eye to note the coolant overflow bypass conduits behind her head. *Well that'd get attention if I ruptured that, but also I'd be dead in under two minutes. Not an optimal result,* she thought.

But then she opened the other eye and looked further along the ring. She spied one of the stabilising clamps that held the core in place under normal operating conditions but could be triggered in an emergency to eject a breaching core.

She closed her eyes again to read her memory of the operating manual pages about those clamps; setting one off completely would not be enough to eject the system, but even the slightest misalignment would trigger an alert in both the chief engineer's station and multiple bridge consoles.

Anna peeked over the edge once more and saw that none of the aliens were by Geordi's desk, which was in a locked-screen mode anyway since he wasn't around. With a deep breath and little nod to herself, she moved her hands to close her imaginary screen and then inched further along the ledge until she could confidently reach the clamp. She then reached around its other side until she could feel the manual release, briefly wondered how bad things

would ever have to be on a ship like this for anyone to manually release the core from way up here, but then pulled the first part of the lever open. She tried turning the dial underneath and confirmed her suspicion that it would take much more force to operate that part of the mechanism than she could muster from this angle, but the release lever itself was easy to flip off and on.

Off and on is all I need to send a message, she thought, and immediately put into play something she'd learned in her childhood that she never imagined she'd find a real-world use for.



Stardate 47164.6 (Monday 02/03/2370, 02:09) — Bridge

Ensign Giusti was sitting at the ops station running an unusually heavy load of sensor sweeps and other information-gathering as per orders when she noticed a small, red flashing icon in the lower right of her screen. She frowned at it, but before she could investigate further, it disappeared. She blinked at it, decided it must not have been anything, and turned her eyes back to more important tasks.

But when the little red icon appeared again, she reached towards it tentatively to bring it up for more information. However, it once again disappeared.

Behind her, Data asked, “Is there a problem, Ensign?”

“I don’t know, sir. Something is popping up but disappearing before I can read — oh! There it is again! And now it’s gone.”

Data rose from the Captain’s chair to come stand behind her, watching that corner of the console with her. When it next came on he said, “That is a warning that a manual override is being activated on one of the warp core stabilisation clamps.”

“But it keeps going away,” Giusti remarked. “It’s very strange.”

Data watched the alert come and go several times. “It is a pattern.”

“Yes sir, I think so, but I’m not sure what yet.”

Data was about to order her to run it through the computer when his own internal code-recognition algorithms detected the type. “I believe it is an old Earth Morse SOS code with something else in between.”

All eyes on the bridge were tuned to the flashing red light as Data read out, “A. S. O. S. D. A. T. A. S. O. S.”

Giusti looked up at him and said, “Sir, someone’s sending you an SOS.”

Data immediately asked, “What is the precise location of that clamp?”

Giusti tapped several keys and read out the internal coordinate numbers.

Data replied, “That is in the conduit ring at the top of main engineering. I know who that is.” He turned to Lieutenant Yoon at the security station behind the Captain’s chair and ordered, “Contact the security duty officer for engineering for this shift.”

After a moment, Yoon replied, “No response, sir.”

Giusti added, “Sir, I’m showing all command and security functions within main engineering are locked.”

“Are you able to give me a life form count for main engineering?”

“I think so sir,” Giusti replied. “Sensors are still operational.”

Yoon asked, “Should I sound an alert, sir?”

“Not yet. If we are being contacted in a clandestine way, there must be a reason. I believe Specialist White has once again climbed to the top of main engineering to escape something that has frightened her, and she is sending me a message.”

Giusti reported, “Sir, I’m reading six humans, one Bajoran, and five Tarkanians.”

Data immediately went to the small weapons locker at the port side of the bridge and drew a phaser as he ordered, “Lieutenant Yoon, you have the bridge. I am proceeding to Lieutenant Worf’s quarters and then engineering. Do nothing to alert the Tarkanians

to our approach, but do wake the Captain and Commander Riker and call them to the bridge.”

“Yes sir. Understood.”

As soon as Data was in the turbolift, he tapped his combadge. “Data to Worf.”

“*Yes sir?*”

“I am approaching your quarters. We have an intrusion in engineering in progress with possible hostages.”

“*Understood.*”

“Begin summoning your team in quiet mode to Deck Thirty-Six. I am almost at your door,” he said as he exited the turbolift closest to Worf’s side of the deck.

Worf stepped out of his quarters just as Data arrived, a phaser in his hand.

“Is Alexander secure?” Data asked.

“He is asleep. He knows not to leave at night if he wakes and I am not present.”

“Good. I will explain the situation as we go,” Data replied, turning back towards the turbolift.

When they exited onto the port side of Deck Thirty-Six, they found a security team waiting silently for them. Lieutenant Nkosi approached, pointed to a man on the floor, and whispered, “We found Popovic here on the floor by the turbolift, unconscious. I’ve called a med team and they’re on their way.”

Worf asked, “Have you made contact with anyone in engineering?”

“No sir. As per your orders we’ve been waiting out here, but we can see someone’s feet by the engineering entrance. I think it’s probably Igmits. She was on duty in that location. The rest of the team is on the other side of the main engineering entrance, awaiting your orders.”

Data quietly said, “It is likely at least some — if not all — of the engineering crew have been likewise incapacitated, but Specialist White is still functional and atop the core.”

Nkosi nodded. Worf hand-signalled to the security team to approach engineering cautiously, all of them with phasers at the ready. Nkosi tapped their badge, said, "Approach with caution," into it, and then tapped it back off.

As the group moved around the corner where the entrance to main engineering jutted out, they noticed three things: Ensign Igmits was indeed unconscious on the floor, the other team was approaching from the other side, and the heavy, blast-shielding doors to engineering were closed.

Worf nodded to his team and several immediately tended to Igmits, carrying her back to Popovic's location just as a medical team arrived. At the same time, Nkosi drew out a tricorder and waved it at the doors, whispering, "I can't get any readings through the shielding plates."

Data said, "No, you will not be able to." He opened a control pad to the side of the doors. "I will attempt to bypass the door lock and then I will enter first."

"But sir —" Worf began.

"I can sustain significantly more of an attack than any of you," Data said calmly as he continued to tap commands into the control pad. "Further, I have noted that both Igmits and Popovic have similar holes in the middle of their uniforms over their chests, as if they have been hit with a projectile or sharp implement. My chest can withstand much more piercing weapon damage than any of yours."

"Yes sir," Worf grudgingly agreed.

"Have your team ready to follow me in," Data ordered as he finished the bypass.

Worf looked at the others and they all nodded at each other, phasers pointed into engineering.

Data pushed a final command key and the doors began to open. He boldly strode in, readily stepping over the limp bodies of the engineers, and began rapidly firing at the Tarkanians who were standing at the consoles.

The shocked aliens took a moment to react, but once they did, they did so with long, grey tails flailing out from between their armoured skirts and Romulan disruptors firing wildly.

Data ordered, “Computer, restore all command functions to me, Data, authorization code two-Kappa-six-six-four-Tango-three,” as he phaser-stunned a large Tarkanian bearing down on him.

The computer replied, “recognised. Command functions now restored to Lieutenant Commander Data.”

At the same time, Worf and the other security officers began shooting into the space, taking down two more of the Tarkanian warriors. One ducked the fire, rolled on the floor, and whipped his tail towards Data. The sharp barb on the end of the tail landed with a clang against Data’s chest, but he simply looked down at it and said, “Hm.”

The Tarkanian was surprised his attack had done no harm, and more surprised still when Data took the tail in his hand and yanked it hard upwards and to the side, pulling the warrior through the air to smack against the floor beside him, whereupon Data fired his phaser once more and finally stunned the fellow into unconsciousness.

As Data said, “Computer, restore all security sensors and protocols,” Worf and the others swept into the space to take down the remaining Tarkanians and begin attending to the engineers.

Nkosi called out, “I think they’re all alive but unconscious like the ones outside.”

Worf and Data proceeded further into engineering, weapons at the ready, but all of the Tarkanians except for Doctor Yommet were accounted for. Data tapped his combadge and ordered, “Bridge, send a secondary security team to the Tarkanian quarters to locate Doctor Yommet.”

“*Yes sir. The Captain and Commander are on their way to the bridge,*” Yoon replied.

Data said, “Thank you, Lieutenant,” and tapped his badge off.

Worf searched around. “I do not see Specialist White.”

Data looked upwards and called out, “Anna, are you there?”

When there was no reply, Data and Worf exchanged a look of concern.

Data called again, “Anna?”

A timid voice from above said, “I’m here. Is it safe?”

“I believe so,” Data replied.

“Did you get them all?”

“Again, I believe so. How many did you see?”

Anna poked her head out over the edge of the ring, prompting Worf to gasp in alarm at someone being in such a precarious position. She said, “I think there were at least four, but I couldn’t see everywhere down there.”

“We have subdued five, which is the total number of Tarkanians on board other than Doctor Yommet.”

“He was the one in the shiny outfit during the tour?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t see him at all.”

“I do not believe he is here. You should come down. It is safe now.”

Worf called up, “That is certainly not safe up there. Hold fast. We will find a way to get you down.”

Data said quietly to Worf, “She is capable of doing it herself.”

“From that height?” Worf asked incredulously.

But Anna replied, “It’s okay. I’m getting good at this part.” As she swung off the ledge and slid down the wall to the middle deck, she asked, “Are the others okay?”

Data glanced behind but then turned his eyes back to her. “They are unconscious but the medical crew is tending to them.”

Anna slid down the rails of the ladder and then hurried to Data’s side, looking all around nervously, her eyes wide, hands twisted together, and visibly trembling. She moved herself between Data and Worf, briefly regarding the enormous Klingon towering over her, but with no apparent fear of him at all.

“That was very dangerous being up there,” Worf said to her.

“Not as dangerous as it was down here,” she replied, eyeing the security and medical staff tending to the Tarkanians and their engineering victims.

“Can you tell us what happened?” Worf asked.

She looked up at him again and stood a little taller, her trembling subsiding. “I was working at the console over there like usual,” she said with a nod in its direction, “when they came in with their whippy tails, stinging Dern right in the chest. And then everyone started fighting so I...” she cringed again and sheepishly admitted, “I ran away.”

“That was the most sensible course of action for you to take,” Data assured her.

“‘Sensible’ feels a bit like ‘cowardly’. But once I was up there I tried to send you a message up on the bridge using the lever on the stabilising clamp.”

“It worked,” Data said. “That was a very good solution.”

Anna smiled a little, but then looked worried again as she quickly added, “Don’t worry, I reset it before I came down.”

“I am confident you would leave such systems in an orderly fashion.”

“How were you able to get up there so fast?” Worf asked, still scrutinising her climbing path.

“It’s easy. I do it any time someone scary comes in here.”

“There is nothing to fear now,” Data gently said.

She smiled a little at him again. “I’m not so scared now.” She turned to Worf to add, “Not even of you, even if you’re much bigger than I imagined. I know I can trust you.”

Worf was confused. “But we have not met.”

“No, but you wrote a whole report for Geordi to send to me.”

The two men exchanged a further confused look.

She explained, “Of all the ships and labs that asked me to come work with them, you were the only security chief who bothered to respond to my question about sexual assault records for the crew, and you didn’t brush it off either. You sent me a proper and honest report, and a message that you wouldn’t tolerate such things on

board. You took me seriously when you could have ignored me like the others did. That told me you're a good, kind man, and as a security chief that means people who are in trouble can come to you and hopefully not have to be afraid that you'll side with...well, with anyone they're afraid of."

Worf blinked in surprise. "You honour me with these words. Thank you."

From the other side of the room, Nkosi reported, "Sir, we're releasing the wounded up to sickbay."

Worf turned to them to reply, "Good. Take the Tarkanians to the brig."

But as Nkosi and another security officer reached down to pick up one of the warriors, a tail flashed out again, seeking another place to land its toxic sting.

Anna let out a little shriek and hid behind Worf and Data, both of whom automatically closed ranks in front of her and pointed their weapons once more.

However, two other attentive security officers fired immediately to re-stun the Tarkanian, who once again fell limp on the floor, his tail drawn reflexively back into his armour.

Data turned to Anna behind him and asked, "Are you all right?"

"No," she said, once again cringed and trembling. "I lied a minute ago when I said I wasn't scared anymore. I am, but I was trying to seem brave. This has been...a lot. Too much. I'm trying to be okay but I'm not."

"You should be escorted safely to your quarters," Worf said kindly.

Picard's voice suddenly emanated from both men's combadges to bark, "*Mr. Data, Mr. Worf, report!*"

Anna gasped and leapt back from them, gripping the railing around the warp core to keep herself upright.

Data replied, "We have secured engineering, Captain. Our wounded are being taken to sickbay and security are removing the Tarkanians to the brig. Doctor Yommet is unaccounted for."

“We’ve located him bound in his quarters. I’ll be speaking with him shortly. Commander Riker is on his way to you now. Once the situation is stable I want a full report up here.”

“Understood, sir,” Worf replied.

As they tapped off their badges, Anna began to cry, cringing further back away from them towards the exit. “Please, can I just go now? I need to go now.”

Worf said, “We may need to speak with you further about this later.”

Anna nodded frantically, still backing her way towards to the Jeffries tube as Data and Worf cautiously followed her. “I’ll tell you whatever you want later, but I can’t stay here anymore. Please let me go now.”

Data asked, “Would you like me to accompany you to your quarters?”

She shook her head. “No, thank you, you’ve rescued me enough for now. I need to go...” She put her hand over her mouth, her whole body heaved, and then she ran to the Jefferies tube entrance and shot up the ladder.

Data and Worf looked at each other again. Worf said, “I do not believe she is well, nor that she should be left unattended for long.”

Data nodded. “Agreed.”



Stardate 47164.7 (Monday 02/03/2370, 02:32) — Deck Nine

Picard furiously strode towards the VIP quarters that housed the Tarkanians, the door now flanked by security officers. He paused for a moment before entering to get his emotions in check so he could approach the situation as a calmly controlled Starfleet captain instead of bursting in to bellow out his frustrations at the scientist inside. He reminded himself that the security team had reported finding Yomet bound to a chair and shouting for help, so

there was a good chance he was not part of whatever had gone on in engineering, but he was also aware that in his increasing fatigue he was vulnerable to crocodile tears.

As he entered, he found both security and medical staff crowded around Yommet, who was sitting in a chair at a small table as the medics tended to dark grey bruising all over one side of his head. He turned and said, “Oh Captain Picard! They’ve done something terrible! My shame is too deep for the light!”

Something about the pathetic tone of his voice and limpness of his usually animated arms made Picard believe the defeated-looking man, though he was careful to reserve his skepticism close at hand. He took the chair opposite and said, “Perhaps it’s time to tell me in plain terms what’s going on.”

“I did try to warn you earlier,” Yommet said defensively.

“I appreciate that. Was it about the Arloff system?”

“Yes. It was up-current to spell it out for you without the translators muddling it or my colleagues —“ Yommet suddenly sat up and uttered a disgusted-sounding guttural sound. “They were never my colleagues. There is no reason to pretend further. I had to hide my translated code from them. Thankfully their sort aren’t known for comprehension,” he said as he then let fly another string of bubbling grunts Picard assumed to be Tarkanian curses.

Lieutenant O’Rourke gently said, “There, I think that takes care of the bruising,” as she lifted her hands away from Yommet’s head.

He turned to her and his posture softened again. “It feels much better. Thank you. Your Starfleet medical interventions are most efficient and appreciated despite how little knowledge you must have of our physiology.”

“Um, yes,” O’Rourke said in the confused tone Picard was coming to expect from any of his crew when simultaneously complimented and slighted by a Tarkanian. When she glanced at him he made the slightest shake of his head to indicate that she should let it go, despite knowing she was the foremost expert on xenobiology on board and Crusher would have sent her for that

reason. She put on a diplomatic smile, said, “Let us know if you need anything else,” and took her team out.

As the door opened, Picard saw Troi standing out in the corridor and nodded for her to enter. She quietly took another seat at the table as Yommet leaned forward to put his head in his hands and bemoan, “All I wished for was to meet other scientists and now my fate has turned to the sting!” He sighed and let his hands drop, but continued staring down at the table in abject shame. “Arloff. I overheard them planning to rendezvous with a ship in the Arloff system, which meant they had no intention of any of us getting to your Starbase. I didn’t know they had plans in your engine room until tonight when they beat me and bound me and said if I was lucky they’d come collect me after returning from from there. They hit me so hard I went to the dark as they left the room.”

“Yes, my crew informed me you were seriously concussed when they found you in here,” Picard replied.

Yommet nodded slowly. “I was told by my government that I could attend the conference on three conditions: I was to be circumspect in revealing any details about our species or homeworld, I was to request a tour of your engine room as soon as possible, and then I was to stay out of the warriors’ way but be otherwise obedient to them. It was heavily insinuated to me that failure to obey these conditions would result in harm to my family but I didn’t see anything wrong with asking for a tour or letting the warriors follow me around, and of course I had no intention of exposing any sensitive secrets about my people to Starfleet or anyone else.”

Troi gently replied, “Were they threatening you while you were on board?”

Yommet extended his arms a little as if to shrug, but tiredly, limply, sadly. “Only insofar as their sort always threatens my sort. We live under their rule and for the most part if everyone does as expected there’s little direct conflict. They order, I obey, I present a pleasant shimmer to Starfleet, they lurk behind. It’s a...dance. Only

they dance with knives, and any thought I had to question why they'd want to see your drive was obliterated by the thought that disobedience might result in harm to my children." He looked to Picard and asked, "Do you have children, captain?"

Picard awkwardly replied, "Uh, no."

"If you did you'd know from the moment you first see them, you'd do anything for them. You'd die for them. You think beforehand that you wouldn't sacrifice your values for them, but then these small lives become your responsibility and you realise you just might, if it came to it. What's so wrong with a tour? I wouldn't snoop about and I decided it wasn't my responsibility if the others did. That's the extent of what I imagined they wanted it for, to snoop about. I had no idea the fools meant to storm the place. I simply meant to do as I was told and keep my family safe and get to the conference. But that isn't how it is at all now, and for all I know my family is already being harmed or murdered for my failure!" he said, putting his head in his hands again. "You cannot know the fear and pain of thinking your children may be hurting and you can do nothing about it. There is no greater failure in life!" he said as he began to sob.

Picard turned to Troi, who gave him a sympathetic look, knowing full well how the thought of one's child suffering alone weighed upon him. But she also gave him a little nod to indicate that Yommet was being truthful.

"What's to become of me now?" Yommet asked plaintively. "Of the others?"

"I'm not yet certain," Picard replied. "With a scandal at this level of diplomacy, I'm required to request a decision from my superior officers. A communication has been sent and I anticipate an answer in a few hours.

Yommet sniffled — a loud, ragged sound in his wide nostrils — and let his hands drop once more. "I see. No trial, then?" he asked resolutely.

“Trial? Not here, not on the Enterprise, no. The Federation will have to negotiate with the Tarkanian government on what’s to be done.”

Yommet eyed Picard warily. “So...you will not be the one executing me?”

Picard was horrified at the very notion. “Executing?! Good heavens, no! That is not what we do in the Federation,” he declared definitively. “Your companions have committed a serious crime against this ship and my crew, and in normal circumstances that would likely result in some sort of prison sentence but nobody’s life is on the line, at least not from our side! If you face execution at home for this having gone wrong, you can request asylum.” But then Picard sympathetically admitted, “Though that won’t help your family.”

Yommet blinked his large, black eyes rapidly, clearly as surprised by the magnitude of his misunderstanding as Picard was. “I...I can’t be sure of anything at home. Clearly we have been told quite the wrong things about the Federation. I humbly seek your forgiveness, Captain.” He turned his head to the side in thought. “Everything is not what it seemed. It is possible that — in light of the warriors having been caught — any infraction on my part will be considered small. Perhaps the failure of the others to achieve whatever it was they sought to do to your ship will shame their houses enough that those houses no longer have the power to threaten my family. So much is uncertain. So much is unknown.”

Troi asked, “Doctor Yommet, may I please get you some water or something else to drink? This all must be terribly confusing and difficult for you.”

Yommet appeared even further confused at her offer, his mouth hanging agape for a moment. “In this moment when I have sunk to the bottom and can scarcely see the surface light, you offer me even further kindness. I do not understand your culture, but I like it.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she said with a smile as she rose and went to the replicator.

Yommet looked to Picard again. “Captain, your mercy is beyond all things.”

“It isn’t mercy at all,” Picard said. “We simply believe in a base level of ethical treatment of others, even our enemies. And I do hope that despite what the others have done, there is still room for the Federation and the Tarkonians to not be enemies.”

“I do not see you as an enemy at all, Captain. I have a sudden desire to go home and tell anyone who will listen of your goodness.” He sighed resolutely and then said, “In fact, the more I think about it, the more thoughts float: what Vaad and the others have done could destabilise our whole society, more than it is already. They have committed a terrible sin, you see.” He leaned close across the table to whisper, “They have shown their tails to outsiders and let those who saw them live.”

Troi came back to her seat, handed Yommet the water, and exchanged a confused look with Picard.

Yommet let out a shrill sound that the other two guessed was a sort of giggle as he took the glass, sipped, and then set it back down, shaking his head. “You don’t know my meaning, and how could you? I’m not supposed to explain it to you.” He leaned in closer again and said, “But I’m of a mind to anyway. Perhaps the time for secrecy has ended. Perhaps I should use their failure to flood the banks, yes?”

Picard carefully replied, “I would very much like to hear anything you wish to tell me, but I must be mindful that I don’t wish to put you or your family in jeopardy over it.”

“What peril they face is nothing you can control, Captain, nor I any longer. And I do see the surface light now, beckoning me to truth and science and an end to the old ways. Perhaps it is time for a non-warrior to be brave and precipitate the change that we all need, my family included. If you wish to hear it, I will tell you the story of my people, that which is forbidden to speak of outside of our world. After all, the forbidding of knowledge is the coldest darkness of all.”

Despite his exhaustion, Picard suddenly perked up at the invitation. “By all means, Doctor Yommet, we would love to hear your story.”

CHAPTER TEN

Stardate 47164.7 (Monday 02/03/2370, 02:42) — Deck Nine, VIP Quarters

Picard and Troi sat in rapt attention to hear Doctor Yomett speak of Tarkanian history that — until that moment — had been kept secret from any off-worlders.

Yomett laid his hands upon the table and explained, “Many thousands of years ago, our people were divided by culture, language, and geography. All on one planet, but in separate and remote groups. Does this seem confusing, Captain?”

Picard replied, “Not at all. My species originated in small groups we call ‘tribes’ and spent much of our history that way.”

“Ah, yes, ‘tribes’ translates the flow well. Some tribes included a rare genetic trait for venomous tails. Those tribes became the dominant houses as cities formed, and for many centuries my ancestors lived in squalor to serve the warrior houses. Nearly everybody’s ancestors did. Being tail-born meant privilege and power over anyone without one.

“But there were many uprisings, many societal changes, and over time emerged our dominant religion focused on duality and opposites to help make sense of such things. After all, when we are born we emerge into the warm, comforting darkness of our birthing caves, yet we soon come to know that the surface light brings food and the love of our parents. We learn from our infancy that everything good comes with the risk of something terrible, and everything terrifying has a chance of going well.”

Something clicked in Picard’s mind; he smiled and said, “Oh I see. That is why you state your praises alongside critiques.”

Yomett blinked in brief confusion again. “Of course. For generations my people believed to praise something without remarking on the negative would curse the positive. These days it’s

primarily seen as impolite, though many people still believe in their hearts that praise on its own is inviting bad luck.”

This information was enormously satisfying to Picard; suddenly what seemed an annoying trait had a purpose, a history, and a deeper meaning. All at once he found that he genuinely liked Yommet and sincerely hoped his words were the honest truth.

Yommet continued, “Even as our society developed scientific principles for understanding what faith used to explain, our religious scholars have wisely adapted to incorporate the new information but always remain true to the foundational beliefs that order is maintained by respecting the duality of things. For the warrior families, that has always meant caring for the population enough that the non-warriors will willingly submit to their control.”

Picard nodded. “We have had that sort in our history as well. It took centuries to overhaul such inequity.”

“Inequity’, yes, a good word for it. It has become more apparent to the younger generations who are on the verge of rising up against it. Increasingly there is rejection for the notion of being tail-born as worthwhile at all, especially in light of it being forbidden to show a tail to an off-worlder unless that off-worlder is about to be killed by it, and many now do not flow with this required violence.

“This is how the ancient partnership with the Romulans worked; our warriors were lucratively contracted to destroy the enemies of the Romulans, and Romulan secrecy became embedded in our culture when it was clear that there was value in nobody knowing how our warriors could slay so many so quickly.

“But it has been centuries since the Romulans broke off ties, and since we’ve been left to ourselves and the warriors have not been out battling anyone in so long, the newer generations have rightly been asking what any of this tail nonsense means anymore. Those who’ve gained power in the religious and scientific communities no longer require the favour of the warrior houses because their mandate comes from the general population. It’s

easier to keep people happy with joyous faith and the comforts that come with science than it is with stories of ancient battles, so it's become everyone against the warriors but still held in check by fear." He leaned forward again to whisper, "That is, until the tails started disappearing."

"Disappearing?" Picard asked.

"It is difficult to know when it started because the warrior houses kept it as a shameful secret before anyone else even knew it was happening. But yes, it turns out fewer and fewer of their children were being born with tails at all, or with only small, weak tails, often with no venom sacs. Some religious scholars found out and let the information flow, proposing that the natural waters are punishing the warrior families for their greed and hubris, whittling away at their power because they did not respect the powerless.

"But when the biologists got ahold of the information, it became known that certain lifestyle behaviours common to the warrior houses resulted in an epigenetic shift that was resulting in fewer tail-born. Essentially the same thing that the religious scholars were saying, insofar as the luxurious, over-fed, and inbred families were the epigenetic cause," Yommet explained in a tone that made it clear he had no respect for the warrior lifestyle.

He continued, "This floated those of us in the scientific community closer to our cousins in the religious scholarly professions. The warrior families saw their power sinking, so they have been stepping harder on all of us, attempting to force us to come up with medicine or rites that will breed more tail-born, but of course nothing that would allow the masses to acquire tails and breed their own uprising over it."

Yommet took on an admonishing tone as he said, "So we told them if they wanted to advance science, they had to open up to the other peoples of the galaxy, to share science and culture with them. But all they've seen fit to allow are limited interactions they believe will benefit them. I was entirely shocked when I was told I could attend this conference, because I'm not a biologist. I assumed there was interest in improving warp travel in general.

Now I realise that I've merely been a splash towards their other political goal of re-igniting their long-lost partnership with the Romulans.

"The Romulans?" Picard asked. "Is that who they were meeting? Is that why you mentioned them when we spoke?"

"Yes that's why I spoke their name, though I am not certain of a meeting, forgive me" the doctor said, timidly apologetic once more. "However, I do know warriors in general and this lot I've been stuck with are particularly obsessed with Romulans, so I propose an educated hypothesis that they were trying to steal something of yours to use in gift or trade to the Romulans. But I have no solid evidence of that."

Troi asked, "Is there anyone else the warriors might likely try to bargain with?"

Yommet shook his head. "Not that I am aware of, no, forgive me." He turned back to Picard to continue, "I now believe they made an error when they chose me for this, Captain, because I genuinely wish to meet others, to talk about all of it openly, and to learn from all of you out here. They've allowed me to appear conversational with you while chastising me in private for it, but I cannot help myself. You're fascinating. All of you," he said, eagerly looking back and forth between the two. "If I had my way, we'd open up our whole world to all of your worlds and share all that we know together."

He put his long hands on the sides of his face and wistfully said, "I am like a newborn coming out of my safe, warm, dark cave to discover the joys of light! Frightening though it all is, if I want to taste what's out there I must hold that fear to my side and swim up!"

Yommet smacked both hands down hard on the table — startling both Troi and Picard — and declared, "I cannot allow the warrior houses to plunge us back into the past with a new Romulan alliance. I don't want to wallow in the cave forever, and I don't want it for my children either. I am changed this day, Captain. Though I am small and weak and have no tail, today they have

made a new kind of warrior of me, and whatever you and your Federation chooses to do with me, my flow is new and fast and I will swim this current wherever it may lead!”



Picard and Troi let Yommet rant himself to exhaustion, but then left him under the watchful eye of security both inside and outside of the VIP quarters as they headed back up to speak with the other senior staff.

“Bridge,” Picard said tiredly as the turbolift doors closed.

“I know,” Troi said gently, patting his arm. “It’s been a rough week for you.”

“I’ve had rougher, and I am trying to convince myself that Yommet means what he says, that all of this will lead to something good for many people.”

“I hope so too, but that doesn’t change what I said.”

“Mm,” Picard replied flatly.

“I assume you know that the alarm was sounded by Anna.”

“Yes. I’ve heard.”

“I’m worried for her,” Troi said, moving around to try to catch his direct eye as he continued to stare at the turbolift doors.

“Mm,” he said again.

“I know you are too.”

At that, he did look at her and snapped, “What I’m worried about is that I’m not allowed to even communicate with the woman who may have just saved my ship.”

Troi stared back at him unflinchingly.

Picard groaned as the turbolift slowed. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for.”

“It’s fine. You’re exhausted.”

The doors opened as he muttered, “That’s hardly an excuse.”

As they stepped out together and headed for the observation lounge, she put her hand on his arm again. “It’s three-thirty in the morning and we’re about to have a meeting about multiple uncomfortable subjects. You’re excused for being a little snippy at me.”

Picard paused just outside the door to give Troi as much of a smile as he could muster, which wasn’t very much at all. But she reflected it back very warmly indeed, and he knew that once again she was indulging him, managing him, and in his fatigue he found that he didn’t really mind.



Stardate 47164.8 (Monday 02/03/2370, 03:32) — Observation Lounge

Upon entering the room Picard barked, “Right. Security status, Mr. Worf?”

“The Tarkanian attackers are secured in Brig Three and Brig Four,” Worf reported. “We separated them for questioning but they are refusing to speak. We have seized their devices with the assistance of Doctor Yommet, who remains under guard in his quarters.”

“Yes, we just left him there,” Picard said as he took his seat at the head of the table and Troi sat to his left. “He’s quite agitated by the actions of the others.”

“We are as yet uncertain as to how much he was involved,” Worf continued. “But the situation is secure for the moment and investigations ongoing.”

“Excellent. Engineering status?” Picard asked, turning to Data.

“Engineering is also stable and secure at this time, sir. Geordi is there now, conducting diagnostics and running security procedures with his teams to determine what — if anything — was taken or tampered with. As of five minutes ago, it appeared that the

Tarkanians were attempting to retrieve sensitive drive and sensor settings information, but were unsuccessful in their goal.”

“We believe they may have gained access to some information if they had enough time, but they were thwarted before they’d broken through security barriers,” Worf said with an unmistakable air of pride.

Data added, “They were employing outdated methodologies and very old access keys that may have once had a Romulan origin. Even if they had had hours, at most they would have accessed minimal information that we would have changed immediately afterwards.”

“Good,” Picard said. “I want to come back to that in a moment, but first, Doctor, injury report, please.”

Crusher said, “Thankfully nobody was killed and everyone who was injured is recovering. I expect them all to be fine by midday, though I’m ordering them all to take it easy with remote medical supervision tags on. The Tarkanian sting appears to be a low-grade neurotoxin and paralytic that wears off within about an hour, leaving headache and nausea, but we’re not fully familiar with it so I’m taking extra precautions. Other than that, it’s some bruising and minor puncture wounds, all of which have been taken care of.”

“From what Doctor Yommet has just told us, I suspect the point of the sting is to render the victim easy to kill before it wears off,” Picard said. “It’s entirely plausible that the plan was to get our people out of the way long enough to begin their primary task, with the intention of finishing them off soon after.”

“Well lucky for all of us, then, that there was someone still conscious in there to alert the bridge,” Crusher said, looking at Picard with a knowing expression. She then glanced to Troi, and the two women nodded at each other.

Picard schooled his face to pretend he hadn’t noticed. “Doctor Yommet was adamant that secrecy surrounding the tails is paramount, and he expects these warriors will be in a great deal of trouble for allowing stung victims to survive.” He then relayed a

summary of what the scientist had said to him and Troi, leaving the other senior officers stunned in their own right.

Riker let out a little whistle and said, “That’s a good intel payoff, at least.”

Worf surmised, “Yomet’s hypothesis that the plan was most likely to steal information to sell to the Romulans seems the most likely explanation.”

“But the age of the access keys suggests they were not being directed by the Romulans in advance,” Data said. “No active Romulan agent would likely bother with such old technology.”

“Agreed,” Worf said. “Even the lowliest Romulan spy would know better.”

“Worf, I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said about the Romulans,” Riker said with a cheeky grin.

Worf glared in reply for a moment, but then turned back to Picard. “Our inspections of their personal devices indicate a possible rendezvous with a ship called the Yuurriet here in the Arloff system, though it is unclear how they intended to transfer over.”

“Starfleet intelligence lists the Yuurriet as nominally an Orion trade vessel but suspected of being a Romulan avenue for espionage,” Data reported.

“Is that ship amongst those we can detect around Arloff?” Picard asked.

“No sir. However intelligence reports indicate it may be outfitted with a cloaking device,” Data replied.

“That’s definitely no trade vessel, then,” Riker said.

Data nodded. “It would be an unusual configuration for that purpose.”

The door opened, and they all turned to see La Forge enter. As he moved towards a chair, Picard asked him, “Your report, Mr. La Forge?”

“I’ve still got teams doing some deep scans and searches, physically and digitally. We’re sweeping that whole room top to bottom just to be sure, but it really does look like all they got was

our front files, the ones the computer places in front of sensitive data the moment there's any kind of security breach in main engineering, including unexpected access or alterations to the security protocols."

Data tilted his head to the side and remarked, "It appears their tampering with security in an attempt to hide their actions was what thwarted their plans."

"Excellent," Picard said, meaning it to the fullest and feeling a glimmer of pride in his crew. "This whole situation could have been much, much worse, and it's profoundly relieving to know our good nature was not successfully taken advantage of."

"Yeah, I think they overestimated what information that tour gave them," La Forge said. "As much as they might've mapped out what console is where, engineering security is a lot more than screen-deep."

"I rather think these warriors are used to getting their way through bullying tactics," Picard said, "so they were likely unprepared for mere scientists and engineers — as they see them — to have much in the way of defence."

"That's probably true," Troi said. "It's unlikely anyone on their homeworld withholds information from them, based on what Doctor Yommet said."

"They will not underestimate the Federation again," Worf said proudly.

"Has anyone told them they were undone by 'mere engineers' and a civvie in the rafters?" La Forge asked with a tired chuckle. "I can't imagine a bunch of tough guys taking that news well."

Riker frowned. "What the hell was White doing up there, anyway? Has she been questioned?"

Data replied, "Only in a preliminary fashion."

"I had intended to ask her for more details on what happened, but she appeared to be frightened of the Captain's voice over the comm and ran away," Worf reported.

Riker's brows went up at Picard. "So it's you she's avoiding?"

“I don’t have enough information to speculate, Number One,” Picard replied, ignoring Crusher’s eyes upon him.

Riker said, “I think it’s worth following up, Worf.”

But Troi raised her hands in concern. “I don’t see any reason to frighten her further. She helped. Isn’t that enough?”

Riker said, “Then she shouldn’t mind helping a bit more by answering some questions.”

La Forge quickly offered, “Data and I can talk to her. She’s not scared of us. I don’t want her spooked off the ship by this, not with the drive installation still coming up.”

Data matter-of-factly reported, “She said she is not frightened of Worf either.”

That information raised several eyebrows around the room, but Worf sat up a little straighter and in even prouder tone than before said, “She trusts me in my role as chief of security.”

Riker scoffed, “So anyone in red is terrifying enough to run away from, but she’s fine with you? No offense, Worf, but that seems a bit strange to me. The more we hear about her, the more I’m wondering what else is going on.”

“What does that mean?” La Forge asked defensively.

Data calmly interjected, “I have observed that Anna has a tendency to sort people into trustworthy or not based on first impressions, and her first impression of Worf was set by what she sees as kind support from the head of security. She is afraid of aggressive human males, and likely has not met a Klingon before. In her personal logical framework, she may believe most Klingon males are supportive and kind and most human males are dangerously aggressive.”

“That would make sense for her, yes,” Troi agreed.

Seeing an opportunity to end his own discomfort with the whole business, Picard asked, “But surely she must know we must be grateful for her actions? Isn’t this the perfect opportunity to prove to her that nobody means her harm?”

Troi shot him a look that he knew meant an absolute “no” to him using this as an excuse to talk to the young woman. “Captain,”

she said in a placating yet warning tone, “I’m tempted to go to her myself, knowing this all must have been terribly traumatic for her and that I can help with that. But based on her history I’m quite certain that if any of us she’s clearly stated aren’t to interact with her try anyway, she will likely run away at the first opportunity and possibly endanger herself in doing so.”

Picard was too tired to argue the point, and once again found a strange relief in being told he couldn’t do what he longed to yet feared to. Instead, he turned to Data and suggested, “Perhaps, Data, since you appear to have established a particular rapport with her, you could convey our gratitude and appreciation for her actions, yet make it clear that the only reason we aren’t all doing so in person is that we respect that she may be uncomfortable with too many senior staff approaching her all at once.”

Troi switched back to her indulgent voice to say, “That’s a very good idea, Captain. Step it back from naming any specific fear she might have and just make it clear that she’s being both appreciated and respected in general.”

“Fine,” Riker said, though he still sounded irritated by the topic. “Worf and Data and Geordi can go question her and say whatever nice things are needed to get some answers.”

Picard noted that Deanna was giving Will a very dark look, and that Will in turn was studiously ignoring it. None of that surprised him, but the dagger stare Beverly had for Will as well was both fascinating and concerning. *This odd situation is insinuating itself into too many corners around here*, he thought. But realising the time and his own need for sleep, he said, “Right. Given that everything is under control with security on high alert, and we are awaiting Starfleet orders on what to do with these troublesome guests next, I suggest Data take back the bridge for the remainder of the shift and the rest of us try to get some sleep. Let’s reconvene at 0730 for an update. Dismissed.”



Picard sat at his little dining table to the port of his quarters, rubbing his eyes and yawning over his croissant. A chime at the door made him lift up his head, sigh, and mutter, "Come."

Beverly entered, stood in the middle of the room, and sighed at him.

"Coffee?" he offered.

She shook her head but sat down at the table. "We should make good on how we keep saying we're going to start taking breakfast regularly together, but today I've already had some."

"Did you go to bed at all?"

"Briefly, but I've been back up for awhile to check on everyone who was injured. They're all doing fine, by the way."

"Good."

She softly said, "I've hardly seen you since you've been back from that whole mercenary adventure of yours. It's hard to believe that a couple of weeks ago, I thought you were dead."

Picard nodded. "I am dreadfully sorry about that." He winced a little and admitted, "It occurred to me that you might be avoiding me, and then it occurred to me that you might think I've been avoiding you."

"Have you been?"

"No, no more than anyone else. Have you?" he asked tentatively.

"Been avoiding you? Not consciously. Possibly on some level, but not because I don't want to talk to you about any of it. More that I know you well enough to recognise when you've holed yourself away because you don't want to talk."

"Mm," he said, taking a sip of his coffee.

"But in light of what happened, I think we do need to talk about her." She paused and then bluntly added, "Anna White. And who she might be to you."

Picard sighed. “I really don’t know what to say about any of it, to be honest.”

“Deanna told me you didn’t want me to know.”

“At the point where I said that, I wasn’t sure there was anything to know,” he said defensively. “I wasn’t trying to exclude you specifically. I was excluding everyone. Deanna just knew anyway. It’s all so much.”

“I can imagine. I gather you still haven’t met her, then?”

“No. You?”

“No, and I don’t expect to any time soon given that she’s understandably afraid of sickbay and doctors. She’s certainly making an impression amongst the engineers, though. Heroine of the day now.”

Picard scratched at the back of his neck. “Indeed. I’m sorry, it’s difficult to talk about. It’s too...uncertain.”

Crusher nodded. “I wish I could help answer that question but I’d need her permission to do a paternity test.”

“Yes, Deanna explained that.”

“But do you think it’s at all likely that you’re her father?”

“I wasn’t sure at first. Went back and forth several times, actually, until I saw her log video.” With a bittersweet smile and trying in vain to hide his tumultuous emotions from her, he confessed, “She’s the spitting image of my mother, Beverly.”

“Oh, Jean-Luc.” She put her hand on his forearm, and he found it more comforting than he’d have guessed.

“Once I saw that, I’ve been wanting to go down there and say something to her. Anything.”

“I almost want to tell you to do it, but Deanna’d have my head. As a parent I know sometimes you have to do things your children will be very angry at you for, but it’s for their own good. But Deanna’s convinced me that in this case, the risk of harm is too high. And knowing what I know about her case, I would never risk harming that poor girl. Never.” She looked away for a moment and shuddered, and Picard decided he didn’t want to know whatever was making her react like that.

Instead, he tried to put a positive spin on it. “Deanna and Geordi both think if we give Anna space, she’ll come out of her shell on her own.”

“Geordi? He knows?” she asked with surprise.

“Oh no, not about any possible relationship to me,” Picard quickly clarified. “He’s simply observed that her fear of command staff is very real. She hides somewhere in engineering and he doesn’t like that. He’s asked me to ensure we all respect her boundary, and as much as it irritates me on many, many levels, I feel compelled to do so. At least for now.”

“Yes, me too. It’s such a shame. She has no idea how much love and support is waiting for her.”

The word “love” jarred him; a heavy word he rarely used, and a concept he hadn’t really thought through in terms of parenthood since having shelved away his feelings for his family that never existed on Kataan. Love had come naturally in that instance because — false though those images turned out to be — he’d known Meribor and Batai from the day they were born. The memory of holding those tiny babies in his hands was still very real to him, and directly, meaningfully linked to his paternal love for them. *How do I love a child who isn’t even a child, whom I’ve never met, who wants nothing to do with me?* he silently wondered. *I’m eager to be friendly and welcoming, of course, but love? I can’t even get my head around that right now.*

But gazing at Beverly’s kind, beautiful blue eyes with that word in his head risked bringing forth other thoughts and feelings he was not ready to cope with. He smiled awkwardly at her, not knowing what to say.

She smiled back at him and stood, her hand still on his arm. “Well, I’m here for both of you in any way that I can be. Always.” On the last word, she gently squeezed and the warmth of her hand seemed to magically travel through his whole being.

It was all he could do to say, “Thank you. I know that,” and then awkwardly add another, “Thank you.”

She patted his shoulder, turned, and left his quarters. It was only when the door closed that he realised he'd stopped breathing. He shuddered as biological reality came back to him and made him catch his breath. Even as he did, he remained utterly undone by far more than he had been prepared to deal with so early in the morning.

"*Bridge to Captain Picard,*" came a voice from his combadge, startling him further.

"Picard here," he reflexively replied.

"*Admiral Chekote for you on subspace.*"

"Understood. Send it to my terminal in my quarters."

"*Yes sir.*"

Picard pulled himself together and went to the desk, straightening his uniform as he walked. He switched the screen on to find the admiral giving him a grim eye.

"*Well. Picard. Bit of a pickle we have here, now, isn't it?*"

"So it would seem."

"*Is anyone hurt?*"

"My crew who were injured are safe now. I've just spoken with Doctor Crusher and she confirmed they're all on the mend. The Tarkanians who attacked are all securely in the brig and Doctor Yommet is under security watch in the VIP quarters."

"*Your preliminary report indicates you don't think Yommet was part of it.*"

"I don't, and Counselor Troi agrees with that assessment. To be frank, I think he's as outraged as any of us."

"*That's what we're all going to gamble on.*"

"Oh?"

"*You're to turn around and head back to DS4. We're arranging a handover of the entire Tarkanian delegation back into the hands of one of their own ships. Much as I'm sure you'd like to see the ones who attacked your crew punished, the decision is we keep diplomatic avenues open by being the oh-so-gracious Federation who gives them their naughty boys back to be shamed on their own stages. The powers that be over us both are not willing to sacrifice*

this potential ally against the Romulans when instead we can appear above such a trifling effort of sabotage.”

“To be honest, Admiral, I agree with the decision.”

Chekote sat forward at his desk with interest. *“Really? I’m surprised by that.”*

“After speaking with Doctor Yommet at length, I believe the ones who attacked us will be punished for this embarrassing failure, and Yommet hopes that could be the catalyst needed for vast societal change on their homeworld. I’ll send you a full report of my conversation with him later this morning now that you’ve given us our next heading.”

“I look forward to that, Picard. If you’ve got new intelligence on the Tarkanians out of this, it’s going to go down as a major success for you and your crew.”

“Not only do I have ample information, but I also believe it’s worth extending diplomatic protections around Doctor Yommet and maintaining him as a go-between,” Picard suggested, thinking that would potentially serve to keep the scientist safe if the Tarkanians wished to continue to appease the Federation. It was a risk, but as much as Yommet was determined to take that risk, Picard was determined to do what he could to protect him. *Perhaps even get him named as an ambassador,* Picard thought.

“You’ve clearly been up to quite the intrigue over there. I’m impressed. A lot of the right sort of people are going to be impressed, Picard. Well done.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Right. Head on back to DS4, send me that report, and we’ll talk later. And frequently. Chekote out.”

The screen went dark. Picard chuckled. “Intrigue indeed,” he said to himself as he rose and headed to the bridge to meet with his senior staff and relay the new orders, a fresh eagerness to his step for the sort of situation he could confidently handle while ignoring that which he could not.



Having been briefed on the new orders and determined that Anna was located in her lab, Data, Geordi, and Worf went together to see her, each of them fully intending to be as supportive and kind as possible.

Outside the lab door, they could both hear and feel the booming music from within. They shrugged at each other, and then Data activated the chime. The music abruptly ended and the door opened.

They found Anna seated at the table with a variety of cuttings of black material piled about. She had a tricorder in hand and a PADD before her as she looked up somewhat nervously at the three of them filling up the entrance to the room.

Geordi immediately attempted a calm greeting. “Hey there. How are you doing?”

Anna’s eyes darted back and forth between the three men apprehensively. “Um...I’m still a bit shaken but I guess I feel sort of safe in here. Except that this feels like some kind of committee coming at me. Am I in trouble?”

“No, not at all,” Geordi replied.

“We are simply required to get your official statement on what happened,” Worf said, and then hastily added, “For procedural reasons. You are not under any sort of suspicion.”

“Oh. Okay,” she replied tentatively. “Um, here, I can move this stuff,” she said, pushing the piles on the table to the side.

“No that’s fine,” Geordi said, taking a seat right by one of the piles and gesturing for the others to sit so they weren’t towering over her.

“Am I in trouble for climbing up there again?”

“Not at all,” Geordi repeated. “Don’t worry about that. I only don’t like you doing that because I’m worried for your safety, but clearly you were safer up there than down on the deck.”

That seemed to appease her somewhat. She still kept eyeing them all carefully, but her initial defensive posture softened.

Data said, “What we require is for you to tell us the story of what happened from your point of view. There are no wrong answers. You are safe.”

Geordi and Worf exchanged an impressed look with how immediately effective Data’s choice of words were. Anna smiled at him a little and said, “Okay. I can do that. Do you have to record it or something?”

“That is not necessary in this case,” Worf said.

“Okay. Well, it’s pretty much just like I told you. I was working at the console, there were some weird noises like people hitting the floor, but by the time I turned around it was too late and Ensign Dern was getting hit by one of those tails. Like I said, I ran away. I climbed up and hid. When I peeked down, I saw the Tarkanians messing with the consoles in a way that indicated they were probably trying to steal information, and I couldn’t do much about that, but I figured the Starfleet people might be dying so I’d better try to get help. I knew Data was on the bridge and I knew Morse Code from...well it was a phase I went through as a kid. That’s kind of a long, weird story about that. Anyway I sent D-A-T-A-S-O-S repeatedly using the manual release for the stabilising clamp, and then a bunch of you burst in and took care of it.”

“Did you observe anything else about the Tarkanians during the event, or when you saw them from the same vantage point during the tour?” Data asked.

Anna’s sheepish posture returned. “Well, um, the thing is, I wasn’t honestly paying that much attention to them, not even during the tour. I’ve been scared of...other stuff. Silly stuff I probably shouldn’t have been scared of, but I’ve been focusing on trying to not let that silly stuff make me want to run away. So I wasn’t paying attention to the actual threats because I was being too clueless and paying attention to confusing social things.”

Geordi said, “Hey now, you’re not clueless. Far from it. And engineering is full of people who struggle with social anxieties of

all sorts, I promise you. We're all here for you, not judging you. If you're getting overwhelmed by social stuff, let me or Data know and we'll help you."

Anna shrunk into herself a bit, looking quite embarrassed. "That's not what you invited me here for."

"I invited you here to be part of this team and being part of a team is supporting each other personally and professionally. Even if some members of the team aren't being...entirely respectful," he conceded. "But I'm working to take care of that issue too. This is the real heart of what Starfleet is: having each other's back." He turned to the others. "Right?"

Worf replied, "Indeed. One of the difficulties I've encountered aboard Klingon ships is the inability to rely on fellow officers."

Data added, "The supportive structure of Starfleet is one of its strongest qualities in comparison to several other similar organisations."

Anna's expression darkened and she bluntly retorted, "I'm not used to Starfleet having my back at all."

Geordi sighed uncomfortably. "I know. But we all want to show you what Starfleet is meant to be, how it's supposed to be."

Data said, "In the spirit of that goal, I have a positive message to share from the Captain."

But this time Data's kind tone was insufficient. Anna reacted viscerally, immediately cringing back away from the three of them, eyes wide in horror, arms drawn back, her hands in clenched fists over her chest as if she expected a physical attack.

The three men looked at each other in alarm. Data carefully continued, "He wishes me to convey his gratitude and appreciation for your actions, and -

"I just want him and his sort to leave me alone," Anna said, nearly growling it.

Data paused, then began again. "He understands that, which is why —"

But Anna put her hands over her ears and kicked at the table with her left leg to push her chair back away from them, folding

the stump of her right leg up defensively in front of herself. “Please stop!” she shouted. She drew up her left leg as well to ball herself up in the chair and peer over her knees at them. Through heavy breaths she declared, “I don’t want to hear about anything he says ever again.”

When none of the men said anything further, she lowered her hands partially away from her ears. She said to Geordi, “All I want to do is be part of your engineering team like you describe it. I want to get this new drive installed and learn to have friends. Please don’t let the others come after me.”

Geordi gently said, “Fair enough. You’re on our team and we’ll get through all of this together, okay? You need anything, Data and I will help you. If you have a security problem, you can see Worf’s here on your side too, right?”

Anna nodded at them and lowered her hands further, but remained in her balled- up position on the chair.

Geordi continued, “And actually, we’ve got projects in other areas beyond main engineering too. There are lots of things you could get involved with if you’re finding main too busy with people. You don’t have to stick to overnight shifts just to avoid the crowd. Data and I are working on an interesting project with Doctor Crusher, and there’s always other stuff going on.”

At that, Anna uncurled herself a little. “I’ve got projects in here too.”

“Yeah, I can see that. I’m excited to find out what all this is, when you’re ready to tell me,” Geordi said with a smile.

“It’s not ready yet. But soon,” she said, letting her legs back down.

Data said, “All three of us will be in engineering most of today as we need to run multiple security and systems diagnostics. Today would be a good day to be there if you wish to maximise supportive interaction.”

Geordi added, “And everyone will be too busy to be overly social. So yeah, today is a good day to come join us. If you want to.”

“I personally guarantee your safety even at the cost of my own life,” Worf said formally.

Anna’s eyes went wide. “Jiminy Crickets! I certainly hope it’d never come to that!”

“It is an unlikely scenario,” Data said.

Geordi said, “Yeah, despite what it may seem, we don’t usually have battles in engineering. Look, why don’t you take some time to relax while you play around this stuff up here, have some lunch, and then come join us? Very casual, all on your own terms.”

“That...that sounds kind of nice, actually,” Anna admitted.

“Right,” Geordi said as he stood, which prompted the other two do the same. “We’ll give you some space for now, and when you come down you’ll know we’re all going to be really happy to see you, but we’re also going to be too busy to make you feel like you have to be chatty or anything.”

Anna nodded and pulled her chair back to the table as the three of them went to the door. Geordi and Data smiled at her as they left, and Worf nodded politely.

Out in the corridor when the door closed, the three men stood together quietly for a moment. Geordi sighed, Worf glowered, and Data’s brow furrowed, all of them trying to understand why mere mention of the Captain could make Anna react with such fear. At the same time, they all looked up at each other and shrugged in unison, each of them knowing there was no point in asking the others since none of them had any answers. Instead, they all quietly went down to main engineering to get to work.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Stardate 47165.9 (Monday 02/03/2370, 13:17) — Main Engineering

Data was the first to notice Anna's careful approach through the vertical Jeffries entrance, in part because he had positioned himself at the central console facing that direction in anticipation of that likely vector. But this time she was not playful about it; he saw her peering out from under the top edge of the door, observing the state of the room before committing to entering. When her eyes came to him, he attempted to smile encouragingly. It seemed to work, because she righted herself and entered the room, hands twisted, shoulders cowed, but her eyes defiant nonetheless.

He watched as she carefully skirted around to Geordi's corner, where Geordi himself smiled at her — despite being in mid-conversation with others — and gestured to her usual console.

Data was aware that Worf at the fore end of the central console was also watching Anna. He turned and caught Worf's eye; they nodded at each other in understanding. He then continued to watch as Anna completed her nervous scan of the environment and eventually became engrossed in whatever task Geordi had set for her.

Ten minutes and thirty-seven seconds later, there was a sudden burst of exclamation and laughter from one of the teams working in the drive area. Data knew from experience that such a sound was a jubilant one and not indicative of any danger, but he saw Anna leap back out of her chair further into Geordi's corner in a defensive stance as she peered through the window and around the corner, shifting her shoulders and head to alternate between the views, gauging the situation in a similar manner to which he had observed Spot assessing a potential threat.

As he considered going to her to assure her, Worf strode across the room to stand in the wide door to the drive bay and see for himself what was going on.

Geordi emerged from the group shaking his head, but smiling. When he saw Worf there he explained, “They had a bet going on how far the Tarkanians got into one of Sorenson’s fake files. Didn’t get past the external listing, so Sorenson won.”

“Hell yeah I did!” Sorenson bellowed as he high-fived several of those gathered around him.

Worf muttered, “Good,” and then turned on his heel to approach Anna. “This location remains secure.”

Anna stood up straight, but still appeared somewhat apprehensive as she said, “Thank you,” and sat back down.

And so it went for the next hour and eighteen minutes: everyone worked on their respective tasks, a noise of some sort would startle Anna, either Geordi, Worf, or Data would offer her a small gesture or words of assurance, and then they all resumed work.

But as 1500 shift change approached, Data noticed that Lieutenant Covett was regarding Anna with an expression he had heard both Crushers refer to as “stink eye”; an expression he found confusing because human eyes produced relatively less scent than other parts of their bodies, nor was he aware of any human ability to visually perceive scents. Wesley had explained to him that it meant looking at someone or something with displeasure, and all of the examples he cited matched Covett’s current expression very well.

Scent-based or not, Data could tell Covett’s intentions were less than wholesome as he walked over to the console where Anna sat, so he headed over there himself in the hopes that a senior officer’s presence would dissuade Covett from saying or doing anything inappropriate.

Covett, however, took no notice of Data as he crossed his arms and said to Anna, “Thanks so much for that alleged ‘rescue’.”

Data saw Lieutenant Navarro observing Covett and approaching as well, from the opposite side. He calculated a high likelihood of conflict at Covett's obvious sarcasm, but it was difficult for him to understand all of the nuances in time to determine an appropriate course of action.

Anna looked up at Covett — clearly uncertain about the situation herself — and cautiously replied, “Um, I did what I could.”

“Yeah,” Covett said. “You ran away and conveniently left us behind. I would have thought you of all people would know better than to abandon a crew.”

As Anna cringed at the words, Aisling thrust herself between the two, shouting, “Back off, Dean! Leave her alone!”

He uncrossed his arms to hold his hands out to his sides. “Hey, I’m just saying it like it is.”

“Like hell you are. She did rescue you all, and you’re just sore because an untrained civvie stopped something you couldn’t,” Aisling scolded, hands on hips.

“I’m sore because I got stabbed in the chest!”

“Then take the medical leave Crusher offered everyone!” Aisling retorted.

Worf came from behind Data, charged up to Covett and bellowed, “What is the meaning of this?”

But at the same time, Geordi came from the other side to take Covett's arm and lead him out of engineering. “Right, Dean, that’s enough of that.”

Covett protested loudly but didn’t stop Geordi. The two were quickly out of the room, which then fell to an awkward hush.

Aisling turned to Anna — who was wide-eyed and trembling in her chair — and said, “Don’t listen to him. There was nothing ‘convenient’ about what you did. You’re not a security officer, you’re a civilian. It was not your job to join in the fight. You did exactly what you should have done, which was get yourself to safety. The fact that you managed to call in the cavalry was more than anyone could have expected of you.”

“That is correct,” Data said. “Lieutenant Covett’s assessment is unfair and inaccurate.”

Aisling leaned in closer to Anna to gently say, “If you want to get out of here, I’ll go with you. It’s almost shift-end anyway.”

Anna shook her head, cringed away from the many eyes upon her, turned back to the console and said, “I have things to do here. I don’t want to let him win.”

Aisling smiled. “Good. Never let a man’s bruised ego drag you down. I’m here if you need me.”

Data wanted to assure Anna similarly, but the crowd began to disperse and the usual hum of activity came back, and he found the entire situation extremely confusing. As he considered what he ought to say, Worf approached Anna instead and quietly said, “That was...unfortunate.”

Anna shrugged.

Worf continued, “I have learned from personal experience that going head-first into battle is not always the wisest course, and yet many people mistakenly believe that it is better to foolishly appear brave than to make the wiser choice.”

Data could barely hear Anna softly reply, “The thing is, he’s right. I did leave them all to do the fighting for me.”

Worf asked, “Do you know how to fight? To defend yourself? To defend others?”

Anna shook her head. “I’ve smacked back when I’ve had to but it’s always just throwing what’s on hand and running.”

“Then perhaps you would like to join my self-defence classes. I can teach you not only how to defend yourself if the need should ever arise again, but to feel more confident the rest of the time as well.”

“Oh, that’s very kind of you,” Anna replied. “But I’m small and weak and wobbly.”

“You are small, but that does not matter. You are not weak. If you were, you could not climb up and down so quickly,” Worf said, pointing to the upper ring. If by ‘wobbly’ you are referring to your amputated leg, that also does not matter. The techniques I

teach are ancient Klingon methodologies, employed by those who have been in battle and lost all manner of limbs. There is nothing about your physical form that I cannot accommodate. It is your inner *HoS* that requires elevating, but the classes will teach you that.”

“*HoS?*” Anna repeated, attempting to pronounce the Klingon word.

“Your energy, your inner power and strength. The essence of the warrior’s heart.”

Anna laughed nervously. “I’m no warrior.”

“I believe otherwise.”

She blinked at him in astonishment.

Worf said, “I will send you a timetable of the beginner classes. You may join us at any time.”

“Um, thanks.”

Worf nodded brusquely, then returned to the central console to resume his security screening. Anna stared at the floor for a moment, then resumed her task as well.

Data watched all of this unfold and deemed it highly satisfactory. He calculated that it was unlikely that Anna would take Worf up on his offer any time soon — especially since he taught the classes in the gymnasium in the saucer section where Anna was not keen to go during day shift — but also that the offer in and of itself would likely increase her comfort with the crew in spite of Covett’s words.

He briefly caught Worf’s eye, gave him an approving nod, received one in return, and then everyone was back to work.



Stardate 47166.4 (Monday 02/03/2370, 17:30) — Main
Engineering

Shift change happened quietly, in part because several officers who had been on first shift stayed on to complete everything remaining from the Tarkanian attack. There was an air of defiant pride about the place, and with that went the sense of scouring out all traces of the attempted breach. There was also a shared feeling amongst the junior staff that this was a chance to impress the boss by rising to the challenges, especially once La Forge came back in after nearly half an hour gone with Covett. Geordi bore a dark, serious expression upon his return, and that made everyone else want to placate him with work done well.

Nothing further was said about the incident other than Geordi asking Anna if she was all right and getting a nod in reply. Aisling knew Geordi had been pushed too far, and that she needed to stay out of his way for the time being as well. She was confident she hadn't done anything wrong and he wouldn't be angry at her, but she knew him well enough to not provoke him when he'd already had to deal with drama. So she too let shift change come and go while she continued to perform security scans of systems as requested by Worf.

She was glad Worf had been protective of Anna as well. *Between me, Geordi, Data, and Worf, Dean will know better than to mess with her again. I hope. For his sake,* she thought.

But she kept these thoughts well hidden behind a professional mask as she took her latest PADD of results to Worf, still at the central console.

He took the PADD, flicked through it, nodded, and said, "Thank you. I believe this concludes our tests."

"Yes sir, the formal ones. Only I think I'd like to run some more in the background and then look at implementing some further bulwarks going forward," Aisling replied.

"A wise precaution," Worf agreed. "But it is nearly dinner time. I must attend to Alexander. He has a tendency lately to...run wild between the end of school and dinner."

Aisling chuckled and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, tell me about it."

“I do not have to. Aoife was caught trying to bypass the school door security again.”

“What?” Aisling asked. “When, today?”

“Yes. I received an alert about it earlier but did not wish to distract you as no harm was done and your husband attended to the matter at the time.”

Aisling groaned. “Thank you for that.” Then she waved her hand in the air and said, “You know what, let Kajus deal with her tonight too. He’s on pickup duty today anyway. She sometimes actually listens to him, at least.”

Worf grunted sympathetically.

Aisling leaned closer to him to whisper, “Besides, I was thinking I might try to get Anna to come have a little dinner in the break room with me before she goes off alone, especially since Data got called to the bridge.”

Worf nodded. “That seems like a...friendly plan.”

“Maybe I’ll do that now and then write up a proposal for more bulwarks later and send that to you in the morning?”

“That is also a good plan.”

Aisling smiled up at Worf, who glowered noticeably less in response, which Aisling took as downright chummy. She grinned widely as she went over to the console where Anna was still head-down and tapping busily. She tried to glean what Anna was up to, but the young woman was too fast; Aisling could scarcely read the screen before it changed as Anna drilled down and then shot back up between LCARS levels. She could tell it had something to do with nacelle sequencing but the particulars were a blur to her.

As gently as she could so as not to make Anna jump, Aisling said, “Hey there. You okay?”

Anna looked up at her, blinked in confusion for a moment, and then replied. “Oh. Hello. Yes, I’m fine, I guess.” Then she quickly added, “How are you?”

“Hungry. You?”

Anna looked down at her own stomach, and then to the side as if she was calculating her hunger more than actually feeling it. “Um...yes. And no.” She shrugged awkwardly. “Sort of.”

Aisling laughed a little. “Would you like to get some food, yes or no?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t eaten much, so I’m physically hungry, but...” she winced, and then cringed.

“Well I’m hungry and I’d rather have dinner with you right now than go deal with my kid’s misbehaviour and my husband’s inevitable grump about it. I need an excuse to stay down here for a working-meal. Save me, Anna, save me,” she said in a comically droll tone.

“Um, okay,” Anna said with a little laugh of her own.

“Good. Maybe seeing me eat will make you want to eat. I definitely get hungrier when I see other people eating.”

“Maybe,” Anna said dubiously, but nonetheless following her out and down the corridor to the break room. A few of the other engineers were in there, all tiredly picking at plates, gathered in small groups and muttering about what was left to be done.

Aisling ordered at the replicator, “Fish and triple-cooked chips, extra crispy, extra salty” and then sat with it at a table away from the others. Anna sat down opposite her, but didn’t get any food. Aisling pushed her plate closer and said, “Take a chip. I insist. They’re amazing. But careful, they’re hot.”

Anna tentatively took one and bit into it, then nodded appreciatively.

“Good, right?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“You know you can get a whole plate of ‘em, any time.”

“I know. Maybe later.”

Aisling nodded. “Okay. But I’m going to eat anyway.”

“Mhm,” Anna said as she nodded back. “I find social eating a bit weird still anyway.”

“Oh. Right. I didn’t think about that.”

“They made us practice it at The Institute, but that made it weirder.”

“I bet.”

“Anyway, I’ll tell you how I did it.”

Aisling was confused. “How you did what? Ate there? Or how you flipped the clamp off and on?”

“No, I mean how I broke through campus security to alert the JAG officer.”

Aisling gulped. “Oh. Uh, no, Anna, that’s fine. I told you, you don’t have to do that.”

“I know. But you stood up for me today.”

“I stood up for you because it was the right thing to do, not because I’m trying to get you to tell me stuff.”

“I know that part too. That’s why I’m okay to talk about it.”

Before Aisling could further object, Anna lowered her voice to a whisper and began to rapidly lay out how she alerted a JAG officer that she was being wrongfully held against her will in The Institute. “The thing is, it worked because of who I am: I know technical stuff but so little about people stuff — especially back then — so I made assumptions about people that worked out for me even when they were wrong. And blending social engineering with technical engineering turned out to be the key to my cell.

“See, I know that everything about breaking into anywhere is figuring out why the barrier is in place, and then being what it’s not bothering to block. The first barrier I had was in accessing information about the outside world. We weren’t allowed on the general network because they thought we couldn’t handle real-world information. But I could. So step one was getting that access.

“We had educational PADDs with basic language and reading and math programs on them. Kid stuff, all pre-set and locked out of the network. But I knew that the way to lock down a PADD is with a mechanical switch in the back, top-right corner, coupled with a password. So I grew my pinky nail to enough of a point to loosen the screw over the switch housing. I know from my own bad habits

that nobody fully tightens a screw they're going to have to open again."

Aisling nodded as an engineer, but inwardly cringed as a security officer.

"So I activated the network access with the switch, then semi-brute-forced the four-digit password using guesses of common numbers plus the faint wear patterns on the front. Old PADDs, you know?"

"Oh yeah, I know," replied Aisling, completely engrossed and forgetting all about her dinner getting cold in front of her.

"There was no alarm for accessing the network because why would there be? The staff needed to all the time. And nobody changes their network information often enough unless they think there's a threat, so even if the PADDs got switched out I just needed to repeat what I already knew. They never seemed to notice that some were online.

"Anyways, once I had network access I started doing research on how to convince someone to get me out of there." Anna frowned to the side for a moment. "By that point I already knew nobody was ever going to come and get me like I'd originally hoped."

"Oh, Anna, I'm so sorry," Aisling said.

Anna shook her head and continued. "I didn't know they weren't actually allowed to hold me like that. I didn't know my rights, so I started researching other cases where Starfleet tried to strip away someone's rights and lost." Anna screwed up her face in disgust. "There are a bunch, you know. It's a Starfleet thing to do that."

"Not for most of us," Aisling said apologetically.

"For enough. One of the cases I read about was how Maddox tried to take Data's rights away. That's how I first learned about Data. It was really hard to read, for a lot of reasons."

"Yeah, I bet."

Anna shook her head again and continued, "I couldn't make any notes in case anybody checked the PADD. All those hearings, all the things I needed to remember, I had to keep it all in my head.

But see again, the assumption that people can't do that when I can is what made it work for me. They thought I was barely literate and coherent, let alone able to research, so nobody suspected anything."

"Wait," Aisling said. "How the hell did they think you rebuilt that ship if you were barely literate?"

Anna shrugged. "I don't know, to be honest. I don't think Doctor Rundell believed that I did it myself. I think maybe he couldn't believe it, so he didn't."

"I really want to punch this guy for you."

Anna smiled a little. "Me too, sometimes. Mostly I just want him to stay far away forever, though."

"I don't blame you."

"Anyway, once I had a bunch of information that made me sure they had no right to keep me in there — which turned out to be way, way more than I needed — I had to get the right someone's attention. Captain Phillipa Louvois who confirmed Data's rights seemed like a good choice, except she was way out at some starbase and there was no way I could get through that many Starfleet-watched comm links. I needed someone local, but nobody on any of the other cases I read was anywhere close.

"So instead I researched Louvois. I found out who her classmates were, her co-workers, her professors, anyone she might count as a friend. See again, because I didn't really understand people, I assumed friends all thought the same way about everything."

"Uh, no. I can guarantee you that."

Anna nodded. "I've figured that out since. It doesn't make sense, but humans are weird. Luckily, my assumption worked because I whittled the list of likely friendly contacts down to three, and Captain Roberta Avila seemed the best bet because she'd helped emancipate several minors to help them get into the Academy against parental wishes, plus done a bunch of cases where officers were up against Starfleet Medical, always defending the officers.

“So then it was simply a matter of getting into the comm system to ask for her help. Comms are boring because they’re just tubes with gates on either side. You can make bigger, nastier gates but you don’t want to put barriers along the tube or else communications become too cumbersome and people don’t like that.

“Plus JAG has a whole whistleblower system making anonymous reporting easy so the gate on their end was nothing to worry about. All I needed to do was get into the tube from my end. Unlike a general network connection, Starfleet campus comm gates are alarmed. But if you can’t get through a gate, you climb the fence at the side, right?”

“The fence is supposed to be impossible to climb, though,” Aisling said.

Anna scoffed. “It isn’t, especially when a literal portion of the tube in the form of a node ran over the staff office ceiling which was also my floor. General network layout information wasn’t that hard to find, so I knew exactly where to break in.

“My next barrier was the camera in my room.”

“They had cameras in your rooms?!”

Anna nodded.

“That’s ridiculously creepy.”

Anna shrugged. “The people in there are treated like prisoners. There’s no privacy. It’s awful. But I turned it against them. I studied the camera. I researched its type and configuration and network protocols, and I found out how to set it in a feedback loop,” she said with a mischievous grin.

“Holy shit.”

Anna laughed a little. “I waited for a weekend because Doctor Rundell almost never came in on weekends, and he was the only one who paid much attention to me because I was a pretty easy patient most of the time. The others, some of them couldn’t talk at all or they had meltdowns all the time, but not me. I was mostly just quiet, so most of the staff ignored me. But on that Friday night

I misbehaved in the group room enough to lose privileges for the next day, meaning I'd be restricted to my room.

“All morning I laid on the floor right over where I knew the node was, playing on my PADD. Except I wasn't playing, I was typing out my case.

“When they brought my lunch I took the tray down on the floor and ate like that too, so they thought I was just hanging out on the floor. They had no idea I'd already hacked the camera to record myself lying there 'playing'.

“After they took the lunch tray, I knew I had tons of time. I set the camera to replay the morning recording and then I broke into the floor. I'd already broken a metal slat off of my bed a few nights beforehand, so I pried up the floor tile, dug my way down into the gap to find the node, set the node to a passive connection, uplinked the PADD, accessed the JAG whistleblower network, bypassed the menu to send an anonymous message to the general address but then edited the message's internal header to actually point to Captain Avila's terminal address, then uploaded my argument for my release complete with a full admission of everything I was doing and an apology for breaking so many rules.”

“Oh Anna, you poor, sweet thing.”

“I thought maybe it'd help reduce any punishment I'd get for all this hacking. So then I disconnected the PADD, reset the node, put the tile back in place, set the camera to stop looping, and laid back down over the tile to actually play a silly, boring game.

“When they brought dinner they asked if I was going to behave so I could come back out the next day and I said, 'Probably not.'”

“Cheeky girl!”

“Well, it meant they left me alone Sunday too. I guess they figured they'd let Doctor Rundell deal with me on Monday. Except he didn't get the chance. Late on Sunday a bunch of JAG folks came and rescued me. Captain Avila put me in separate lodging while my case was reviewed, and then I got set free. She said sorry. A lot. A lot-lot-lot.”

Aisling sighed and shook her head slowly. “I know most of these systems inside and out. I know how to bust my way in somewhere and how to keep someone else from doing it. But I don’t think I’d be able to put all that together if I was trapped like you were.”

“Honestly, those systems are nothing compared to what’s here on the Enterprise. Even a Tarkanian could get through The Institute’s comms.”

Aisling laughed loudly enough to draw attention from across the room, but then returned to a hushed tone. “I don’t think I could be that patient, though. I’d be screaming at them from the start. I could never be so calm as to think it out like you did.”

Anna shrugged again. “But thinking things out until they’re as ready as they can be is how I’ve always gotten by. It’s why the pace around here can be so scary sometimes. As soon as you start to get to the heart of a problem, the problem changes.”

“Yeah, starships can be like that, especially this one. But let me tell you something here and now: you will not need to do that kind of thing to save yourself again. Not while I’m around.”

Anna smiled a little. “Like Toby to Mrs. Lovett.”

“Who?”

She sang so quietly Aisling could hardly hear, “*Nothing’s gonna harm you, not while I’m around*. It’s a song. I know a song for just about everything.”

“Well you sing out whenever you need someone and I’ll come bust you out. I’ll probably have to get in line behind Data and Geordi and maybe even Worf. But Anna, I promise, nobody’s ever going to lock you up like that again. And it means so much to me that you trusted me enough to tell me all of that. Thank you.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Stardate 47171.4 (Wednesday 04/03/2370, 13:30) — Data's Quarters

As they travelled back towards DS4, Data found that a combination of his duties plus Anna's chaotic appearances and disappearances from engineering meant he had hardly seen her over the past two days. He had an hour to spare until his next required meeting and had intended to spend the time painting, but realised art was not currently his primary motivation.

"Computer," he said, causing a sleepy Spot to raise her head long enough to glare at him. "Location of Anna White."

"Anna White is on Deck Thirty-One, Room 5435," the computer responded, confirming she was in her lab.

Data stood still for a moment, calculating likelihoods of Anna's desire for his company and weighing multiple potential courses of action. He made a decision on the optimal series of procedures, beginning by going over to Spot and performing a brief series of what he thought of as "required affection" pettings.

Spot growled but nonetheless went limp in submission as Data picked her up, gave her precisely eight head-to-tail strokes, two semi-firm cuddles, and then set her back on the couch where she immediately began cleaning herself defiantly.

Data nodded at her. "You are a very good and very pretty cat. I must go now." Then he left since Spot was — as usual — ignoring his words. Still, he deemed them important and found the interaction satisfying.

When he reached Anna's laboratory door, the music was once again both audible and palpable through the bulkheads, but as before as soon as he activated her chime, it abruptly ended and she called out, "Come in!"

As he entered, he said, “I apologise if I am disturbing you or your music.”

“Oh, no, not at all. Wait, is it too loud?” she asked.

“No complaints have been received,” he answered truthfully. “Does it not bother you to have it loud?”

“No, it helps drum out bad thoughts. I like to feel it through me sometimes. Also,” she added with a shy little smile, “If it’s super loud I can sing along and not worry that my singing is offending anyone.”

Data considered once again stating that her singing was inoffensive, but decided to forego that repetition and instead get to the point of his visit as she cleared tools off of a chair and pushed it towards him. “Thank you,” he said, taking the seat. “I have come to realise that our growing friendship is extremely meaningful to me. In recognition of this, I would like to spend some social time with you, if you would be interested.”

“Social? Aren’t we social already?”

“Yes, but usually within a working context. I believe it would be enjoyable to have conversations with you outside of engineering or your lab here.”

“Why Data, I’d love to spend any amount of time with you that you have to spare! But aren’t you busy most of the time?”

“I am frequently busy but I make an effort to balance work time with personal time. I would now like to dedicate more of that personal time to you, if you wish.”

The smile he particularly appreciated suddenly burst out all over her face, and he came to understand the saying about “eyes lighting up”; her increased pupil dilation resulted in higher contrast for the reflected lights of the room. He found it aesthetically pleasing.

“I would like that very much,” Anna said happily. But then she suddenly looked worried and cringed back into her seat, which Data did not find pleasing at all. “I’m not up to any more parties, though,” she said, twisting her fingers against her chest.

“I did not intend for us to attend a party. I am sorry I left your side at Geordi’s birthday party.”

“No, I don’t even mean that part of it. I just...” Anna shook her head. “That was too many people too fast. Too many of the wrong people.”

“I have come to understand better what sort of situations you find overwhelming. Ten Forward is probably not an optimal location for us to socialise. Have you been to the arboretum yet? You expressed a desire to visit it when you first came aboard.”

“No. I kind of got scared off exploring after the party.”

“I predicted as much. Perhaps we could go there during an overnight shift soon, since we are both often available at that time and it will be quiet with most people asleep.”

The smile returned. “I’d love that.”

Encouraged by the smile, he added, “Perhaps I should also introduce you to the holodeck during off-peak hours when that entire deck is relatively quiet.”

Anna nodded, albeit somewhat nervously. “Okay, maybe.”

“I believe it would be beneficial to you to discover more of what the Enterprise has to offer in terms of leisure. I understand why you are reluctant to explore it on your own. It would be my honour to assist you in this, and to be able to spend that time with you.”

She untwisted her fingers to press her hands over her heart. “Oh Data, that would be the very best thing ever.”

Data’s brow furrowed. “I do not believe that is likely.”

Anna laughed, and Data immediately recorded the precious sound into long-term memory.

He said, “I have also come to the conclusion that you have experienced insufficient kindness in your life and that is why you find it so remarkable. It is therefore my intention to show you such abundant kindness for long enough that it becomes normalised for you.”

“That might take a long time,” she warned.

“That is fine. I will continue doing so even after the goal is reached. This intention has no finite end.”



Stardate 47173.8 (Thursday 05/03/2370, 10:28)

Picard tugged his uniform straight as he left his quarters and took a short turbolift down to Deck Nine where Doctor Yommet was still being held under guard. He nodded briefly to the security staff on either side of the door and then chimed for entry into the room.

Yommet was waiting for him, travel case packed and ready. Dressed in much more sober attire than usual, the Tarkanian scientist stood when Picard entered and pointed to the case on the table. “Good morning, Captain. I assume you wish to have your security inspect my bags before departure.”

That was not what Picard had expected at all, so he was temporarily thrown by the offer. But he quickly collected himself and said, “I should hope that isn’t necessary.”

“As would I, yet in matters such as these a tidy formality can often prevent future issues,” Yommet said, taking a polite step to the side and once again gesturing at the case.

Picard sighed, nodded, and asked one of the guards to come in and inspect the luggage. “Make an official report for the record,” Picard said flatly to the lieutenant, who went about the grim detail as efficiently and unobtrusively as possible. When he was done, he nodded at Picard and resumed his post.

“For what it’s worth,” Picard said to Yommet, “all of your colleagues’ belongings are being returned in crates during the handover as well.”

“Yes, I anticipate that we’ll all be doing a careful diplomatic dance today,” Yommet replied. He stepped closer to Picard and

added, “But I do hope you understand how deeply appreciative I am of you and your team throughout this ordeal.”

“I am appreciative of you as well, Doctor,” Picard replied. “And I will remain concerned for your safety until you are free enough to send me a message confirming it.”

“That will likely be some time.”

“I am acutely aware of that.”

“*Captain,*” came Worf’s voice over his combadge. “*We will initiate docking procedures with Deep Space Four in thirty seconds.*”

Picard tapped his badge. “Thank you, Mr. Worf. I will proceed to the docking gate with our guest.”

“*Understood, sir.*”

Picard tapped the badge off and said to Yommet, “We’ve decided to escort you over freely and — as you’ve noted — diplomatically first. Joint Federation and Tarkanian security forces will handle the transfer of the others later.”

“I...I do not have to be in the same space as the others?”

“No. We thought it best to avoid that.”

Yommet smiled broadly. He put his long hands on the sides of his head, then crossed over his chest, and then reached out to touch Picard’s arm. “I cannot fully express how much relief that gives me.”

“Yes, but unfortunately I cannot assure you that your own delegation will be as accommodating.”

“Oh I know, I know, Captain, I do. But the way you continually sparkle like surface light above gives me such strength and hope to persevere though whatever else I may face. Come then, my friend, I am ready to swim up.” He picked up his case, put the strap on over his chest, and held his head high.

Picard chuckled lightly. “Technically, we are going down to access the gate,” he said as he led Yommet out of the room and the guards fell in line behind.

Yommet waved his hand in a brushing motion. “Up, down, we’re in space. It’s all relative. You have lifted my spirits and spirits know no direction.”

“Wisely and bravely said,” Picard agreed as they all entered the turbolift.

“Speaking of bravery, Captain, is it true that the warriors were brought down by a female human who is not only tail-less but has only one leg?”

Picard’s stomach clenched. He’d successfully kept thoughts of Anna at bay for the past two days by burying himself in discussions and reports about the Tarkanians, and he was not keen to think about her during a diplomatic handover. “Um, yes, in a manner of speaking,” he said cagily. “She alerted our security team.”

Yommet clasped his hands together with great enthusiasm. “That is absolutely wonderful, Captain. Tails are a male-only trait so there are no non-male warriors. The rest of us have long felt that our roles being filled by all genders strengthens what we do.”

The turbolift doors opened and as they exited, Yommet glanced back at the guards behind him to say, “I’m not supposed to tell any of you that. But the time for secrecy is over. You may repeat that to anyone you wish.”

The two security officers exchanged a very quick look with each other and Picard, who gave a small but clear shake of his head as Yommet laughed and began walking ahead of them with a light gait. “Oh Captain, Captain, Captain! This news will shame the warrior houses further. I do wish I could thank this officer of yours.”

Picard caught up to Yommet’s side in the corridor leading up to the wide gate. “She’s actually not even an officer. She’s a civilian consultant.” More of security staff stood along the corridor, and he hoped Yommet would stop blurting out any more potentially delicate facts in front of them.

But Yommet instead emitted a joyous squeak and raised his hands in the air, waving them fluidly side to side. “Captain, you

bear so many gifts when I have been nothing but a burden! Not even an officer?! What a new flow we're in now!" He clasped his hands before him once again and asked, "May I impose on you one more time to please send her my utmost gratitude and apologies?"

The gate began to open. Picard awkwardly said, "I will ensure she gets that message, Doctor Yommet."

On the DS4 side stood more Starfleet security officers. Right in their midst was Commander Rosen, a polite grin barely masking clenched teeth, her own hands clasped diplomatically before her even though her entire posture communicated exactly how displeased she was to have to take the Tarkanians back. "Hello Captain Picard," she said. "Why, it's been whole days since we've last seen you. Quite nearly a week, even!"

Picard had several placating words prepared for the Commander, but Yommet derailed the entire plan by rushing forward and launching every security officer into high alert with weapons drawn. But instead of reacting in any due concern or fear, Yommet stood before Rosen and bowed his head deeply, arms gracefully extended out to his sides in supplication as he deeply intoned, "Oh Commander Rosen, you who have been so hospitable to us all, I place myself at your mercy as I have already to Captain Picard! I have no excuse for the shame my fellow travellers have brought upon myself and all of my kind, but I offer you my own abject apologies and pledge of obedience to whatever course you deem necessary."

Clearly had had his own placating words prepared, Picard thought.

Rosen blinked at him in astonishment. "Uh, okay then," she said, turning to look at someone in the corridor behind her.

"That is quite enough, Doctor," came a silky, fluidic voice from behind the security detail. They parted to admit another Tarkanian, this one dressed in what Picard guessed to be very formal robes of some kind of religious or administrative nature.

Yommet gasped, "Magistrate Forkoria!" and fell to one knee in even more pronounced supplication.

The magistrate made an odd movement with his head and eyes which Picard interpreted as a Tarkanian variety of an exasperated eye roll. “Yes, fine, very good Yommet. Up then. Come with me. There is much to discuss.”

Yommet sprang upwards, turned briefly to smile and wave at Picard, and then appeared to quite happily leave with the magistrate and an assortment of Tarkanian guards, none of whom were nearly so armoured as the ones that had been aboard the Enterprise.

Picard stepped forward through the gate as the Starfleet security team followed the Tarkanian one. He and Rosen stood watching them head off.

Rosen explained, “Apparently some nerves have been hit and it’s set off a whole set of chain reactions we’re not allowed to ask about.”

“Indeed,” Picard replied. “Do forgive me for disrupting your ‘boring procedures’.” It wasn’t what he’d planned to say, but it summed it up well.

Rosen laughed, then waved her hand dismissively. “Meh, you tried. It’s the damned Tarkanians who don’t respect my need for tedium.”

“Oh I believe there’ll be ample tedium to come with all sorts of new trade negotiations and border discussions and who knows what manner of treaties with subclauses galore.”

Rosen pretended to bat her eyelashes at Picard. “Captain, you do know how to sweet-talk a tired, old bureaucrat.”

Picard chuckled a little, relieved that it looked like Yommet was safe for now and accepting that the others would be dealt with outside of his comment or control.

“Come on,” Rosen said. “I’ve got your tea and your next orders in my office.”

“Oh?” he said as they began walking through the station.

“The Raman has run into some trouble with their engines at Marijne Seven, just outside of Federation space, so they’re hesitant to put out a general distress call.”

“Understandable.”

“HQ says now that the Enterprise has come back this way anyway, they want you to go assist. Hopefully you’ll be able to give them whatever technical assistance they need quickly and then you can head over to Starbase 84 more or less on schedule to pick up your new drive assembly. It’s all in here,” she said as they entered her office and she handed him an isolinear chip.

Picard took it and frowned. “Marijne...that must be at least two or three weeks out at our comfortable cruising speed.”

“Twenty-one days at warp seven, I checked already,” Rosen said. “We’re still in limited communication with the Raman so I don’t think you need to burn out your engines at max just yet, as long as their situation remains stable.”

Picard nodded and gratefully accepted the tea she handed him. “Do we have details on their engine trouble?”

“Seems that they’ve gotten themselves stuck in a pocket between waves of severe atmospheric disturbances. They’ve tried to send reports but they’re having trouble getting clear communications through. HQ sent their mission parameters along with the orders. That’s on that chip too.”

“You’ve been very thorough. Thank you,” Picard said, sipping his tea.

“What can I say? You’ve gone and made my life exciting again so I had to return the favour.”

Picard chuckled, certain that there was little to be excited about in a rescue mission as long as the Raman sat tight and waited for them patiently.



Stardate 47176.1 (Friday 06/03/2370, 06:54) — Jefferies Tube
Between Decks Thirty-One and Thirty-Two, Sector Four

Anna had been sitting in the tube as far away as possible from any junction point on either side for ten minutes when her PADD beeped with an alarm of six minutes until shift change. She'd decided that was the least likely time for anyone to be in any Jefferies tube at all, since overnight shift would have wrapped up and morning shift wouldn't have yet begun. She'd checked the duty roster just in case; there were no scheduled maintenance tasks in this tube. Plus it was close to her own quarters, which she figured was a good plan in case something went wrong and she had to get her injured self back to a safe place for what she always thought of as "biological repair".

I know we're not supposed to replicate our own medical first aid equipment on a Starfleet vessel but that never stopped me on the Baltimore, she thought. Besides, worst case scenario here is I slide too fast and get a bump and a bruise. I'm not going to be stupid enough to see how fast these things go. Then she grinned. Well not at first, anyway.

When 06:55 hit, she grinned wider still and selected the first of her remaining three test prototypes. She'd used the panels in her lab to calibrate down to a very small range of sliding ability under load, but today's test was her first real-world application to determine which mat would give her the right balance of mobility and safety.

Anna hoisted herself up enough to slide the shiny, black oval of material under her backside and outstretched legs. The idea was to be able to slide around the tubes without putting any pressure on her knees, so she'd made it long enough to accommodate her legs at full length regardless if she had the artificial one on or not. But sitting there, she found she wanted to draw her knees up somewhat into a more stable position.

Experimenting with what was comfortable, she thought, *I really should have tried sliding down snowy hills when I was back on Earth. I was too delighted at just getting to see snow to even think about that at the time, I guess. Also, it was ridiculously cold!*

Settling on a comfortable partial leg-bent position, she whispered, “Here goes!” and pushed off with both hands to propel herself forward. It worked, but the excess portion of the oval shape in front of her kept catching on the floor panels and bunching up, immediately slowing her.

Anna pulled a face and grunted at the problematic material, pulled out a multitool from her pocket, set it to a short blade, roughly cut the excess off, and then tried again.

This time she sailed smoothly down the tube with fairly low effort, a success that made her squeal with giddy delight. She zoomed back to her starting point, cut another sample to fit, and tried that one. It required even less effort to move, but felt on the edge of being out of control. It was easy enough to grab onto something and stop, but she realised that randomly grabbing the sides of Jefferies tubes carried the risk of grabbing something that should not be touched at all, especially during an emergency repair scenario.

She started the whole process over again with the last sample, once again cutting it as needed, and then slid down with what felt like optimum speed and control. She let herself coast to a gentle stop well before the junction point, then pumped both fists in the air in brief triumph, accidentally punching the ceiling of the tube above her head.

“Yay OW!” she called out, hearing her voice echo down the tube. Anna cringed in place to see if anyone had noticed, and then looked at the quickly bruising indentations on her knuckles and growled lightly at herself. She rubbed them lightly each in turn, muttering to herself in an imitation of Ray Bolger’s cadence and 1930s accent as the pre-Scarecrow farmhand in the *Wizard of Oz*, “Now lookit, Anna, you ain’t using your head about these tubes. Think you didn’t have any brains at all!” She waved her hands in the air and blew on her knuckles to cool the swelling little sores, and then turned back towards the middle of the tube and sighed. However, her success quickly resumed its impact over and above her minor injury. She grinned as she slid back to pick up her other

samples and cut-off bits, and then giggled repeatedly as she slid back to the junction.

Triumphantly, she tucked everything into her pockets and climbed back up to Deck Thirty-One, where she hurried as fast as her artificial leg allowed back to her lab to record her results and begin finalising her project, completely ignoring the little angled marks on her hands.



Stardate 47178.0 (Friday 06/03/2370, 23:45) — Anna's Lab

After a series of messages back and forth through the day, Data had determined that Anna intended to sleep in the afternoon but was available to visit the arboretum with him once night shift was underway.

He knew via the computer that she was in her lab, so he went there to find her once again amidst a pile of cuttings of black material and a polymer casting tool, typically used to form barriers around cables, ODN fibres, and other small conduits. She glanced up at him with a grin he suspected might have been full of mischief, but he was not confident in his evaluations of human facial expressions.

“I’ll be right with you, give me one second,” she said.

Data knew from experience that when humans said that, they meant “a short period of time” and never actually a measured second. He was intrigued by her process; she appeared to be making a smooth, rolled edge bead along the circumference of an oval of the slightly reflective fabric. But in watching her work all the way around, he noticed she had several small bruises on the backs of her hands.

“You are injured,” he said.

“Huh? Oh, that. No, I’m fine,” she said as she finished, setting the tool and material aside. She smiled at him again. “My project’s

almost ready. I think I should be able to show some of you Monday morning at first shift.”

“I am intrigued by your work, but concerned about your hands.”

She lifted them to look at them more closely. “It’s just some silly bruises. I accidentally bumped them. Doesn’t even hurt anymore.”

“Perhaps you should go to —“

“Don’t say sickbay,” she demanded, her expression suddenly very serious. “I’m already nervous enough about going up closer to the saucer section. Do not even say the word sickbay.” Then she frowned to the side and asked, “Or is it two words? Is it sickbay or sick bay?” She waved her hands quickly and squeezed her eyes shut. “No, no, I’m not going to think of it at all, regardless of the words.” She lowered her hands, took a deep breath, and slowly opened her eyes. “I want to have a nice time and not get myself all worked up. So ignore my hands, please, they’re fine. I used to bang myself up constantly on the Baltimore. A little bruise isn’t anything to worry about.”

Data did not like the fact that she was injured or her insistence about not mentioning sickbay, but he understood why she didn’t want to go there and he was eager to foster the nice time she was looking forward to. He decided it was best to cease discussion of her injury — though he fully intended to keep a watchful eye on her hands for any sign of the bruises spreading — and instead focus on the point of his visit. “Would you like to see the arboretum now?”

“That would be lovely. Yes please.”

They left her lab and stood in front of the turbolift door across the corridor.

“Deck Seven should be very quiet at this time,” Data said, intending to be reassuring.

Her eyes went wide with fear. “Deck Seven!?”

Confused, he replied, “Yes. That is where the arboretum is located.”

“I thought it was on Deck Seventeen? Here in the drive section but just under the connection the saucer section?”

Data’s brow furrowed for a moment, then lifted. “Ah, I understand your confusion. That is the standard Galaxy Class Botanical Division Arboretum, which is a laboratory filled with plants and trees collected from research missions. But you expressed a desire to see the ‘arboretum with real grass’. That is the Keiko O’Brien Arboretum on Deck Seven. It also features a pond and more decorative floral beds.”

“But that’s in the saucer section. Way, way, way deep into it.”

“Yes it is, but again, at this time of night there will not be very many people around in the corridors or likely in the arboretum at all.”

Anna stepped back away from the turbolift, wringing her hands.

Data was concerned that she would make her bruises worse, so he added, “It is also unlikely that we will encounter anyone in a turbolift at this time.”

“I know. I just...” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “I’m being irrational, I know, but I can’t help it.”

“It is my understanding that fear and irrationality often exacerbate each other.”

“Yeah, they do.”

“We do not have to go,” he offered, though he strongly wished for her to find enjoyment upon the grass.

Anna looked down the adjoining corridor towards the entrance to the vertical Jefferies tube. “Could we...maybe if we went up the Jefferies tubes instead? Those are definitely not going to have command types skulking about this late at night.”

“That is true. However, it is a long climb from here to Deck Seven.”

“Oh, I don’t mind at all. I love climbing. It calms me, actually.”

Data said simply, “Hm,” and then gestured towards the entrance to the vertical tube. He noted the return of a happier expression, posture, and gait as she went to the tube and began to climb up the ladder.

He found it fascinating to observe her climbing a long ladder instead of changing between different surfaces as she did when she ascended to her hiding spot in main engineering. She was highly efficient in her movements, not stepping up the rungs one by one in a walking motion, but more leaping up them in a manner similar to how he had observed Spot climbing the shelves in his quarters. Anna pushed off each rung with her biological foot — effectively carrying the artificial one along for the ride — but primarily used her arms to pull herself along.

It occurred to Data that Anna likely had to learn various non-standard modes of mobility in her years on the *Baltimore*, especially due to its nose-down positioning. He found her climbing action to be impressively elegant for its purpose.

When they reached the junction where they needed to briefly switch to a horizontal tube beneath Deck Nine, she stepped aside on the landing and looked to him, slightly breathless and pink-cheeked, but smiling. “That was good, thank you.”

“If that helped ease your concerns, I am glad to have done it. Hopefully your bruises have not been made worse.”

She looked at her knuckles. “Oh no, they’re honestly not as bad as you think. Anyway, crawling down here will be the worst bit.” She learned towards him and conspiratorially whispered, “That’s what my secret project is about.”

“I considered that as a possibility, but I will refrain from inquiring further until you are ready to share what you have come up with.”

Anna giggled a little, then turned to peer down the horizontal tube. “Do you mind going first now? Not just to lead the way and unlock the hatches, but...could you check the corridor where we come out on Deck Seven to make sure nobody’s there?”

“Certainly,” Data replied. “Whatever it takes to set you at ease.”

His preferred smile returned, and it occurred to him that there were many things he would be willing to do to elicit that smile; too many for him to immediately come up with a number, since many

possibilities required significant consideration on multiple factors. He decided to compile a partial list at a later time.

As anticipated, when he emerged from the hatch nearest to the arboretum's entrance there was no sign of anybody nearby. He offered her his left hand to assist her out, and she took it in her right as she always did, smiling at him again.

"It is right over here," Data said as an excuse to let go of her hand and gesture towards the double doors that led to the arboretum.

Also as anticipated, there was nobody in there either. Anna entered cautiously nonetheless, scanning the room for people before she even noticed the vegetation. But once she did, she smiled widely and clasped her hands before her. "Oh Data, it's so beautiful!"

"I agree. Keiko's work has many aesthetic qualities. She would be pleased to know you are enjoying it."

"Oh, you know her?"

"Yes. She is a good friend. I speak with the O'Briens via subspace regularly. I will be certain to pass on your compliments."

"I have so many compliments for this!" she said as she moved to the middle of a grassy area and spun around slowly with her arms outstretched. "*The hills are alive with the sound of music!*" she sang, and then laughed and flopped down upon the grass on her back, running her hands through it while gazing dreamily at the ceiling.

Data moved to sit near her, mimicking the motion of her hands and fingers with his own to try to share in her experience.

"It's so soft, isn't it?" she asked, turning her head to look at him.

"It is softer than some things and less soft than others," he replied.

She laughed softly and turned back to the ceiling again. "That's true. But it's cool too, like real grass on a real hill. It's so refreshing."

Data put his right hand firmly against the ground to determine its temperature. It was indeed three-point-eight degrees Celsius cooler than the ambient air temperature. “Hm,” he said.

“I’m going to close my eyes and pretend there’s a blue-blue-blue sky above us,” she said. “Tell me something.”

“Yes?”

“Something. Anything. A story. A joke. Random mechanical specs. Just talk to me about anything at all. I’m pretending we’re in a big, open meadow on Earth and absolutely, completely safe from any bad things ever.”

“We are reasonably safe here,” he said. Then he did as she asked and began telling her about the arboretum’s creation, about Keiko, and soon diverged into stories about the O’Briens in general. Anna asked occasional questions but mostly he prattled on freely to his delight and apparently hers as well. At the thirty-three minute mark, he noted that this was the longest anyone had ever let him just speak about whatever he wished to.

A social subroutine alerted him to ensure that he was giving Anna space to speak as well, though she seemed quite content to wriggle around in the grass listening to him. He said, “Perhaps you should tell me something now. I do not wish to monopolise the conversation.”

“Me? Oh, right, okay,” she said, turning onto her front and propping herself up on her elbows, chin in her hands. “Um, I did think when you were talking about Chief O’Brien’s clever use of the older equipment how I used to love watching old Earth history videos about the earliest computer technology, the big ancient mainframes. Have you seen any of those?”

“In a museum once, yes,” he replied. “They were very large relative to their processing power.”

“And hot and loud,” she added. “And people had to use all sorts of external materials just to run them or make use of them, like massive reels of tape or paper punch cards or sometimes they’d print out piles and piles of paper information. Can you imagine? Using mashed up trees to print out computer files?!”

“They were limited in their options at the time.”

“They must’ve been to put up with those things. I was fascinated and horrified all at the same time at the size and cacophony of those printing machines. They made the most torturous, nearly-screaming sounds, like NNNNEEAARRRRRRRUUMMM!” she belted out, then laughed at her own noise. “Back and forth like that all day. Can you imagine trying to work in a room like that?”

“It would likely be very distracting for some people.”

“I guess maybe you’d get used to it. I get so mesmerised watching those old videos. I kind of wanted to see a real one in action somewhere, but I never got around to finding where I could do that while I was on Earth.”

Data quietly rose as she was speaking and went over to the replicator he knew to be partially hidden behind a shrub along the starboard wall.

“I really did mean to go to more museums and ruins and interesting places than I actually did,” she continued. “I have all of this curiosity about so many things, but then I get spooked or there isn’t time because I’m researching something or...well it was always something in the way, I guess.”

Data silently entered a command into the replicator for a small piece of paper and a pen, and then returned to sit back down where he had before as Anna continued talking and idly picking at the grass in front of herself.

“I try sometimes to imagine what it must’ve been like to live back then, on the cusp of the technology we all take for granted now, but not be able to even do something simple like take a shuttle to the moon. Not that I got around to doing that for tourist reasons either, actually. I went once with Doctor Cortez, but we were inside the whole time so it was just like any other conference centre, really. It must’ve been so exciting to live back then, but also a little sad to never get to see the technology get to the point where it’s like this,” she said as she pointed around the room and

rolled onto her back once more. “Let alone as fancy as you,” she said, smiling up at him.

“I am indeed quite ‘fancy’ technology by early computing standards.”

She chuckled and closed her eyes again, wriggling her shoulders back into the grass.

Data held the paper in his right palm and began to rapidly draw a series of dots on it while emulating the printing machine noise Anna had made earlier.

She sat up suddenly at the sound. “What are you doing?” she asked with a laugh.

Data paused, said, “I am honouring my technological past and serving as an ancient dot-matrix printing device for your amusement.” Then he resumed making the noise and hitting the paper with the tip of the pen.

Anna flopped back again amidst gales of laughter, watching him eagerly and giggling all the while. He glanced up at her several times to make mental records of her mirth while continuing to provoke it.

“What are you writing? I mean, ‘printing’?” she asked, still laughing.

Data paused again. “You must wait until it is complete.”

With more laughter still, she feigned a dramatic pose of desperate longing, but then turned onto her side to watch him, smiling enormously the entire time and occasionally snort-giggling when he emulated the printer noise particularly loudly. He noted that his level of satisfaction with this social activity was significantly higher than anticipated.

When he finished, he ceased the noise and turned it around for her to see. She eagerly moved closer to sit up in front of him. “Oh Data! It’s a tree! You’ve drawn a tree on paper! It’s wonderful!”

“I thought it an apt subject matter.”

With an appreciative grin she said, “It’s very meta. I love it. You should hang it up somewhere very prominently.”

Data handed it to her. “It is for you. You may hang it if you wish.”

She sat up straighter still to take it reverentially in both hands. “Really? Oh my. I wasn’t expecting gifts tonight.”

“I did not anticipate creating one. It is mostly a joke.”

She hugged it close to her chest and beamed up at him. “It may have started out as a joke, but it’s become a lot more than that. Thank you. I’m going to cherish it forever and ever.”

“If you wish.”

She looked at it again. “Is it one of the trees in here?”

“It is an amalgamation.”

With a playful glint in her eye she asked, “Can we play a game where I guess which part is from which tree?”

Data again said, “If you wish.”

Anna squealed with delight and got up to her feet. She hurriedly pulled off the shoe from her biological foot and began scampering around the entire arboretum, comparing the drawing from his vantage point to the various branches on trees around the room, coming to him for confirmation and occasional hints.

While Data played along, he also contemplated how he had prepared several social subroutines for a visit to the arboretum but none of them are anywhere close to what was unfolding before him. Anna routinely defied his anticipated scripts and continually surprised him with unexpected reactions and unanticipated delight found in the strangest of places. Her novelty was beyond intriguing, bordering on actual excitement for him to be able to function off-script in so many pleasant and harmonious ways unlike he had ever experienced with a human before.



Stardate 47178.3 (Saturday 07/03/2370, 01:35) — Deck Seven

As Data and Anna left the arboretum and emerged into the wider corridor, the approach of another person made Anna gasp and jump to hide behind Data. But then she breathed a loud sigh of relief and said, “Oh, it’s Reg.” More happily she called out, “Hi Reg!”

Data said, “Good evening, Lieutenant.”

Reg stopped short himself, also not having expected to see anyone in the area. He blinked in confusion at the other two and stammered, “What are...I didn’t know that...I thought I was the only one scheduled for work on this deck right now.”

Data clarified, “We are not working, therefore our presence would not appear on the duty roster.”

Anna gleefully explained, “Data showed me the arboretum. It’s so lovely!”

Reg shot a brief look of ire at Data, then regarded Anna desperately and continued to speak in anguished sentence fragments. “But I thought you didn’t want any of us to...we’re not supposed to...that is, you don’t like when...”

Anna tried to assist him by filling in, “You mean coming up here to the saucer section? I don’t like it, believe me. In fact, I made Data come up the Jefferies tubes with me because I was too afraid to come out of a turbolift and find someone I didn’t want to see up here.” She turned to Data with a smile and added, “But I think I’m feeling brave enough to take the lift down since it’s unlikely there’ll be any surprises right outside my door down there.”

“It was unlikely there would have been any up here either,” Data reminded her.

“I know, but climbing made me feel better anyway.”

“Yes, that was evident. It was a good choice.” He turned to Reg. “You are here to repair the secondary water filtration?”

“Uh, yes,” Reg replied distractedly, still gazing forlornly at Anna like a dejected puppy.

Assuming Reg was unhappy with the duty role, Data attempted to be helpful by reporting, “I observed that the arboretum

operations screen is reporting a related minor error, but I anticipate your repair will fix both issues.”

Reg awkwardly replied, “I’ll...um...check the arboretum screen when I’m done.”

“Very good. Thank you, Lieutenant,” Data said with chipper politeness.

“See you later, Reg!” Anna said in her own cheery tone as the two passed him to head to the turbolift, neither of them noticing the furious, jealous glare he gave to Data’s back as they left.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Stardate 47184.7 (Monday 09/03/2370, 10:15) — Main Engineering

The crew went about their duties and downtime as usual during the days towards Marijne. The bridge personnel kept in touch with the Raman's crew through garbled messages, but it was clear the Raman was holding steady and knew help was on the way. Data, Crusher, and La Forge spent much of Saturday and Sunday working on the interface suit, prepping it for potential use if needed for repair or rescue once they reached the Raman. Anna made final adjustments on her sliding mats, frequently smiling at Data's tree print in a little blue frame upon the wall.

When she arrived in main engineering partway through first shift with several of the black mats tucked under her arm, she grinned at Data. He paused his task of assessing drive readouts on the central console to approach her and ask, "Are you ready to show us your secret project?"

"Mmhm," she said with a nod, but then peered around him nervously. "Not to everyone at once, though. That's too many people looking at me. Would you mind gathering a few and coming up to the tube junction just up there?" she requested, pointing up the main vertical tube. "Maybe you, Geordi, Aisling, and Andrea? And I guess Reg if he's around." She leaned in closer to whisper, "I think he gets lonely and I know what that's like."

"Understood. I will gather them for you if they are all available."

Anna giggled excitedly and went back up the tube.

A few minutes later, Data and the others squeezed into the junction of horizontal and vertical tubes to find Anna sitting on one of the mats with a wide grin and bright eyes full of excitement.

“All right, Data says you have something to show us,” Geordi said. “This what you’ve been up to all this time?”

“Yep!” she said. “I hate crawling through these tubes. It hurts my knees.”

“Tell me about it,” Aisling groaned.

“Well now we don’t have to crawl anymore! Look!” Anna said as she shoved off and went sliding down the tube.

“Oh wow,” Andrea whispered under her breath.

“Hey now, careful in there,” Geordi warned.

“I am being careful!” Anna called from midway down the tube. “I’ve calibrated the mats to only go a little above average human walking speed under average adult human mass. So if you’re little you can go a bit faster and if you’re really big they’ll be a bit slower, but mostly they only go about this fast at the max,” she said, shooting back towards them and then gliding to a stop well before the junction. “I’ve also reduced the inertial glide so you can’t go far once you stop pushing, and so you don’t slide around while you’re actually trying to work on something. Probably shouldn’t use ‘em in a battle situation if the whole ship’s being tossed around or there’s any risk of inertial dampener malfunction area-wide, but next time anyone needs to make a general repair in a horizontal tube...” she pushed down the tube again, backwards this time to keep grinning at them while they watched.

“Wait, you made some for all of us?” Andrea asked eagerly.

“I made ten for now, but I also uploaded the specs into the replicator system with options for bigger and smaller sizes so people can adjust them however they like,” Anna said as she slid back towards them once more. She looked to Geordi and asked, “This is okay, right?”

“It’s pretty amazing,” he replied with a wide grin of his own.

Anna clapped excitedly at his approval.

“Every dancer in Starfleet is going to love you now,” Aisling said. “But I do need to make sure my daughter never finds out about these.”

“I can make some smaller ones if you want,” Anna offered.

“Oh hell no!” Aisling exclaimed. “If she got ahold of one of these we’d never get her out of the tubes!”

“Children are not supposed to be in Jefferies tubes at all, barring escape procedures,” Data said.

“Pardon me, Commander, but have you ever known that to stop Aoife?”

“I have not,” Data conceded. “She appears to be quite immune to regulation.”

Aisling snorted. “That’s the most diplomatic way anybody’s ever put it.”

“Anyone want to have a try?” Anna asked, pointing to the other nine mats she’d left tucked into a ladder rung.

“May we, sir?” Andrea asked Geordi.

“Sure, as long as everyone’s careful,” he replied.

“Go for it,” Aisling said to Andrea as Anna climbed out of the way. “Always best to experiment on an ensign first”

“Hah hah,” Andrea teased back to Aisling before smiling meekly at Geordi. She got on the mat and launched herself down the tube. “Whee!” she shouted as she slid. “I volunteer for all the tube jobs now!”

“Yeah, Tyler, you know that means you’d have to actually do all the actual job parts, right?” Geordi called after her.

“It’d be worth it, sir!” Andrea called back from the far end of the tube.

Geordi leaned over to Data and muttered, “I have a sudden urge to add a complete inspection of every ODN conduit to the roster.”

“Routine ODN inspections were completed on stardate 47152.7 and will not be due again until 47229.4,” Data replied.

Geordi chuckled and patted Data’s shoulder. “Yeah, I know. Never mind.”

Aisling called down the tube, “Are you coming back, or have we lost you for good?”

But Andrea was already sliding her way back at top speed. “I’m not sure I ever want to stop!”

Anna handed a mat to Reg, who had remained at the back of the group, silent with his arms crossed. “Reg, you want to try?”

He blinked rapidly at Anna, but crossed his arms more tightly. “I..I don’t think I should. I have work to do,” he said brusquely before scuttling back down the vertical tube and returning to main engineering.

Anna asked worriedly, “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, he’s been like that all morning,” Geordi said.

“All weekend,” Aisling muttered.

Geordi turned to Aisling with an inquisitive look, but the latter shrugged and said “Something’s set him off again. No idea what.” Aisling turned to Anna to take the offered mat out of her hand and said, “Anyway, no, it’s not you. I’m game to be next unless my superior officers want to jump in.”

Geordi gestured towards the tube and said, “Be our guest.”

Andrea stepped out to let Aisling in. “These are fantastic, Anna, really really. Are you going to show the others?”

Anna hesitated. “They’re for everyone but I don’t think I can handle showing everyone at once. And it’s cramped in here.”

“May I take this and show them?” Andrea asked both Anna and Geordi.

“Please do,” Anna replied.

“Sure thing,” Geordi said, but added as Andrea headed down, “Just be sure to make it clear: no racing!”

“I will!” the Ensign confirmed as she bounded into the room below.

“Please. You know there’s absolutely going to be racing,” Aisling said as she got herself positioned.

“If I’ve said not to do it, it’s not my problem if anyone gets themselves hurt breaking the rule,” Geordi said.

“That’s the wishful sort of management thinking that only comes from non-parents,” Aisling said as she shoved off and cackled her way down the tube.

“Am I going to be in trouble if people get silly and race and hurt themselves?” Anna asked with a worried expression.

“No, don’t worry about it,” Geordi replied. “Especially if, as you say, the mats don’t slide around unintentionally too much.”

“The thicker perimeter works to stop the edges from catching on the floor panel perforations and also as a sort of gradual brake,” Anna explained. “But I can’t really stop anyone from modifying the design to make them ridiculously fast. Some of my early samples were nearly frictionless which turned out to be a lot less fun than you’d think.”

“Engineers are going to be engineers about it. You’ve done a really great thing here. I can think of a lot of folks on other ships who are going to want these. Okay if I share the files around?”

“Of course!” Anna said, her smile returning. “I’d be really honoured if lots of people found them useful.”

“That seems a likely result,” Data said.

Anna beamed at him across the tube junction and continued doing so as other engineers began to assemble below to have a look and a turn.



Stardate 47185.3 (Monday 09/03/2370, 15:25) — Counselor Troi’s Office

Troi took a moment to sit with her eyes closed, taking deep, calming breaths. She had a semi-regular 1600 weekly appointment with Barclay coming up, but he’d sent a desperate message during the middle of the first shift asking if he could come early, so she’d told him 1530 would be fine. She could tell that something had gone wrong for him, and anticipated a difficult session.

Moments later she could feel someone’s fury coming down the corridor towards her office and was not surprised when Reg came in seething. She wasn’t sure why, but knew from experience that this sort of resentful anger usually meant another woman had rejected his advances, so she prepared herself to rehash all of the

things she had said to him multiple times before that never seemed to quite get through regardless of her varied methodologies.

“Have a seat, Reg,” she said, trying to project an air of calm warmth.

But Reg was not having it. He paced relentlessly, his arms crossed, a deep scowl on his face. “It’s not fair!” he blurted. “It’s just not fair!”

“Something is obviously bothering you. Let’s try to find a way to talk it out together.”

“Of course it’s bothering me! It’s not fair!” he repeated.

“I understand, Reg. Let’s both sit and take some deep breaths so we can start with —“

“But it’s not right! Senior officers are supposed to know better! Senior officers ought to follow the rules the most, not just go around them whenever they feel like it to get to new people first!”

Oh no, not this again, Troi thought, knowing Barclay’s propensity for projecting his own issues onto the senior staff. She’d thought they’d made progress on that, but he appeared to be regressing. Still, she had rules about conduct within her office and while she invited her patients to move about if they needed to, she’d had to lay down firm reminders to Reg multiple times about basic professional respect within her space, and how storming about and spouting without engaging was not useful to anybody. So she crossed her hands over her folded knees and looked at him pointedly until he got the message and grumpily plopped himself down on the couch opposite her.

“Good,” she said. “Now, why don’t you start by telling me what’s going on? As I’ve explained before, I can’t help you if you shout at me without giving me the relevant facts.”

“I’m just saying,” Reg began defensively, as he always did, “that if there are rules, everybody should have to follow them. If there’s going to be a rule that we’re not allowed to ...you know...be interested in...that is...go on a date with someone...well then everyone should follow that rule.”

Troi carefully replied, “If there was such a rule, yes, everyone should follow it. But there is no such rule.”

“There is for her!” Reg snapped. “We got this big speech from La Forge before she came aboard about not bugging her, not flirting with her or asking her out or anything, but oh no, he’s Data, he’s special, he gets to break the rules and then the two of them are always...they’re constantly...” He snidely mimicked a high-pitched giggle, then sneered and added, “With all his stupid, awful jokes.”

Troi was completely taken aback and confused, but then a possibility dawned on her. “Wait, Reg, are we talking about Anna White?”

“Of course,” he said, snapping again. “Who else?”

“And you saw Data and Anna on a date together?”

“Yes!” he said, throwing his arms in the air as if it was an obvious and well-known fact. “He took her to the arboretum.”

Troi paused to see if he’d say more, but when he didn’t she asked, “And?”

“Well?” Reg responded.

“Well what?” Troi asked, genuinely confused.

“We weren’t supposed to ask her out or anything!”

Troi knew she needed to unpack this pile very carefully. She took a deep breath and said, “Okay. First of all, I’d like you to reflect on whatever it was you observed and take a step back to see it a little less passionately. It is my understanding that Data and Anna are friends and that Data has been taking extra care of her.”

“I bet he is,” Barclay grumbled with a snort.

Troi put both feet on the floor and leaned forward to firmly say, “Reg, that’s inappropriate.” When he shrunk back in deference, she continued, “It’s also likely inaccurate, but you’re being very hostile right now and I need you to regain control before you say anything worse and start lobbing around actionable accusations. Do you understand?”

Glumly, he muttered, “It’s just that...it’s not fair.”

“Tell me why it isn’t fair,” she prompted, knowing his likely answer based on his history.

“Because...” he started aggressively, but then he took note of her stern posture and shrank back again to mutter, “...because...well...because she was nice to me.”

“Go on,” she encouraged, hoping this would be the time he would finally remember her repeated lessons about how a woman’s kindness was not an indicator of romantic desire. This happened so often with Reg that Troi had lost count, though she realised she should probably start keeping an actual tally in her notes. It was one thing to give him space to learn and improve, but with a highly vulnerable woman like Anna White involved, she recognised that the time had come to be more forceful about it if Reg could not demonstrate having learned this key social lesson.

“She...she’s nice, is all,” he said sadly. “Really sweet. And smart. And she...well...” he trailed off in a sigh. Troi hoped he was on the edge of a breakthrough of understanding, but then he scowled again, crossed his arms again, and shouted once more, “It’s not fair! She can’t put out edicts that nobody’s allowed to ask her out and then go out with somebody anyway!”

Apparently today is not the day he has finally learned any of it, Troi thought in frustration. She said, “Lieutenant Barclay, that is quite enough. Everybody is allowed to set their own boundaries about when it’s acceptable to approach them romantically or not.”

“But she —”

“Everybody, Reg,” Troi said definitively. “Everybody. And nobody has the right to demand that kind of attention from anybody else. Ever.” She held up a hand towards him. “I need you to really, really reflect on that and all of the times I’ve said it before. After Ensign Sinclair’s report of your harassment —”

“I didn’t harass her! I just —”

“You kept following her around the ship — even though she’d asked you to stop several times — until she felt so uncomfortable she requested a change of department. And I told you then that a condition of you remaining aboard this ship is that you begin to demonstrate an increased understanding and respect of other people’s personal boundaries. Ensign Sinclair decided not to

formally charge you. She came to me instead of security because she sincerely wanted you to get help, and I've tried to give that help.

“Now it's your turn to show me that you've learned something, Reg. I recognise that you find it difficult to understand other people's point of view at times, but that's not a valid excuse to make women feel uncomfortable in their professional environment, let alone their personal lives. Anna is particularly vulnerable, and I happen to know for a fact that Data is on a mission to help her learn to have friends. If he took her to see the arboretum, that's all it was, not that it's any of your business even if it was more.”

Cowed but still with a glimmer of defiance in his eye, he retorted, “You haven't seen how she looks at him.”

In her most crisp, professional, unyielding tone, Troi said, “She can look at him any way she wants to and still have a boundary about not being romantically pursued by anybody else. She came to this ship on the guarantee that nobody would harass her. Data is clearly not harassing her. You are on the verge of it with the words I'm hearing from you today, and it's not appropriate. If she is nice to you, take that for what it is: that she is being nice to you. It's not an invitation to anything else. It doesn't negate her boundaries. Do you understand?”

Dejected and pouting, he grumbled, “Yes.”

Softening her body language and tone a little but not fully, Troi said, “Then please tell it back to me in your own words.”

Looking to the side like an errant child, Barclay recited, “Just because a woman is nice doesn't mean she's in love with me.”

But Troi wasn't going to let him off that easy this time. “Those are my words from a previous session. I'd like to hear it in your own.”

He rolled his eyes and said even more petulantly, “People can have whatever boundaries they want even if I don't like them.”

She crossed her knees and clasped her hands over them again as she said, “Good. Now I'd like you to personalise that to this situation.”

He glanced her and became a little more sheepish. “Anna’s off-limits, even if she goes all over the ship with Data.”

Troi nodded but said nothing, hoping he’d continue.

Barclay squirmed. “And...I suppose...if she’s nice to me I should appreciate that and just be her...friend.”

With a warm smile, Troi said, “Very good. That would be lovely, wouldn’t it? To have a friend who can talk about engineering projects with you?”

“I guess.”

“Wouldn’t it be a lot nicer to actually talk with her and not feel the anxiety that comes with worrying about impressing someone romantically?”

Reg looked up at her and blinked, his whole posture changing as the rage finally left him. “Oh. I...I didn’t...I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

Seizing on this small breakthrough, Troi sought to get him to empathise as much as he was capable of doing. “Anna’s had it really tough, and she needs good role models for friendship. I’d like to see you rise to that challenge. I want you to come up with a list of ways you could possibly interact with her — or anybody else, for that matter — that demonstrate how much you’d like to make friendships of your own. And then tomorrow we’ll go over your list together and I’ll help you figure out which are positive steps and which need rethinking.”

Reg smiled a little with a fresh eagerness to get it right. “Okay. I can do that. I’m good at lists.”

“I know, Reg,” Troi said indulgently. *That’s why I keep asking you to make them, to snip your fuse and redirect you entirely.* “Would you like to go get started on that project now?”

He nodded so she sent him on his way, reasonably confident that he was not enough of a risk for the moment that she’d have to override his confidentiality to report a potential threat to security. *But he does like to make me ride that edge,* she thought as she turned to her terminal to make her official notes.



Stardate 47191.6 (Wednesday 11/03/2370, 22:40) — Picard's Quarters

Picard put his dishes back in the replicator and slowly walked towards the centre of his quarters, lost in thought yet again about what it must be like to be lost in space. The Enterprise had left Federation space two hours prior, which was exhilarating to him as an explorer but also made him contemplative about how the Covaris system was also on the edge of Federation space, albeit almost exactly in the opposite direction with Sol as a centre point.

He pondered how in their current region there were several populated systems, starbases, and trade routes. Covaris — by contrast — dangled alone in the middle of nowhere, almost as close to Gorn space as Klingon, with the fairly rough colony on Kessik Four the closest Federation point, and even that was weeks away for the Baltimore's cruising speed.

He could not help but also contrast how the flagship was riding off to rescue the Raman stuck at Marijne, while the records showed it was over six weeks before Starfleet got around to sending the Yosemite out to investigate the ceased communications with the Baltimore.

A shudder ran through him and he went to his desk terminal to find a list of the current crew of the Raman. Skimming through, he breathed a sigh of relief when he discovered there were no children aboard.

Then again, he thought, that was the mistake the Yosemite made, assuming there were no children aboard the Baltimore because none were listed. But he shook his head and told himself, That was a different time and this is a different situation. The crew of the Raman are all still alive and communicating with us even if their messages are garbled. There'd be no reason for them to hide a child on board. These days, they'd mention that front and centre.

Still, he couldn't shake the notion of how easy it was for a single lie to snowball into devastating consequences. As happened a lot lately, a cascade of questions began to flood his mind: why had Meredith had hidden the child, how had Anna slipped through the system unnoticed, why wasn't there anyone looking out for her anywhere along the way before she even set foot on that cursed ship?

Because I should have been looking out for her, he thought.

Picard caught himself about to descend once again into a spiral of guilt and shame and actively decided to stop it. He turned to the chip containing Anna's logs and picked it up, holding it before himself as he wondered if the second entry could be as emotionally devastating as the first. It occurred to him that eventually Deanna was going to ask if he'd watched these, and he didn't like the thought of answering that it was too difficult. That felt cowardly, especially given that if a little girl could survive all of this, a Starfleet captain ought to be able to handle hearing about it.

With a resolute sigh he plugged in the chip and brought up the second entry, dated 44330.1.

Once again the video began with a shakily held imager, pointed at Anna's brightly-lit face too close to the camera. She began in a slower, more measured tone and pace than the previous log. "Okay, um, it's the first of May, 2370. I'm not sure what that is in stardate. It's listed up on the system above, but that's not what I'm thinking about right now and I think better in Earth dates still. Don't know why, I just do. Weird, I guess, since I barely remember the place."

She's nervous, he realised. *No, not just nervous. She's frightened. I think she's preparing to launch.*

"But I'm going to launch today no matter what," she said in the video, and Picard nodded, feeling as though he was nodding to her in a way. He felt a sudden, inexplicable urge to encourage her on with it; there was something so desperate in her eyes that he instinctively wanted to reassure her, not as a father but as a senior officer to a jittery ensign.

“I’m not going to have another birthday on this planet, one way or another,” she vowed. “I’m not exactly sure what I’m supposed to put in this log, so I’m going to carry this imager around with me for final inspections.”

With that she stood and jostled the camera around. Picard guessed — based on its eventual resting location and the continued jiggling as she moved around — that she’d affixed it to her left shoulder, pointing forward to see what she was seeing.

As she zipped down her ropes to the engine room as she had in the first log, she said, “If something goes wrong and I die, I don’t want anyone saying it’s because I was reckless or just a kid or didn’t know what I was doing.” She landed and crossed over to the primary drive console. “Because maybe early on when I started this, I was all of those things. But I’m not anymore. I think I might actually be good at this stuff, or at least good enough. Good enough for me, anyway, if not for anybody else,” she said a little defiantly, and Picard suspected he was the target of that barb.

Next, she went about the very serious business of a pre-launch checklist. It wasn’t a standard Starfleet sequence, and she glossed over several required Starfleet redundancy checks in favour of novel elements that were part of her uniquely rebuilt vessel. Picard noted the video’s significant length; while he was somewhat tempted to skip some of the incredibly technical bits, he also felt compelled to watch the entire thing. He felt that Starfleet owed her a thorough, respectful viewing of all of this work that they ought to have done for her, and while it was likely that several Starfleet and Daystrom officials had studied this portion of her log, he owed it to her personally and professionally as well.

As she went on, he noticed that he was beginning to feel a sense of pride in her work. She was clearly proud of it, but he too felt proud of her, which he knew he had no right to be. But as the enormity of her technological achievement unfolded, it was impossible not to be awed and impressed and want to indulge in a personal connection to it all. He wondered if Starfleet Academy had courted her over this, but assumed if they had, she’d probably

rebuffed them. Possibly rightly so: her expertise in her own system was well beyond cadet level.

The first inspections had been very succinct and to the point, often returning to her extremely fast-paced speech, but as she got to the final ones, Picard noted that she was once again slowing down and lingering a little. *She's almost done, and she's afraid to wrap it up and start the actual launch*, he realised. He felt her fear weighing on him, almost bringing him to tears. *She shouldn't have had to be this brave, but her bravery is incredible.*

As if she'd heard him through time and space, she suddenly chuckled and said, "I've delayed it long enough, I guess. I wonder if Cochrane was this worried before his launch? Did he keep imagining what it'd be like to explode and be aerosolised into millions of bits of blood and bone? Did he wonder if it'd hurt? Does it hurt to die? Living sure hurts a lot of the time, I guess."

She went eerily quiet, then suddenly forced out some laughter, shouted, "I am about to embark on a hazardous and technically unexplainable journey into the outer stratosphere!" and began climbing back up her ropes towards the new fore of the ship.

As she climbed she jauntily sang out, "*Where am I goin'? I don't know! Where am I headin'? I ain't certain! All I know is I am on my way! When will I be there? I don't know!*

When will I get there? I ain't certain! All that I know Is I am on my way!"

But as soon as she landed on her foot on the upturned wall of the retrofitted shuttlebay, her song changed to a haunting melody that echoed about the space as she moved around activating pre-launch sequences on the consoles. "*Someone show me a way to get outta here, 'cause I constantly pray I'll get outta here. Please won't somebody say I'll get outta here? Someone gimme my shot or I'll rot here!"*

She swung herself up to balance in front of another set of panels and continued singing, "*I showed me how and I will, I'll get outta here. I'll start my engines' upthrust and get outta here. Computer tell me I still could get outta here!"*

The Baltimore's computer replied, "*Query not recognised. Please restate within standard parameters.*"

Anna laughed but continued singing, the tempo picking up gradually. "*Someone tell Lady Luck that I'm stuck here! Gee, it sure would be swell to get outta here! Bid Covaris farewell and get outta here!*" Then she abruptly stopped singing and said, "Computer, confirm established settings conform to previously specified pre-launch list."

The computer replied, "*Confirmed. No deviation from established settings detected.*"

"Thank you," Anna replied, then swung herself to another end of the room and set the imager down on a surface at waist-height. "I guess it's time to suit up. I hate these things," she said as she began putting on an EV suit. "But I hate not breathing even more."

Picard noted as she tugged the suit on that she'd knotted off the right leg, binding the lower leg and boot assembly higher up the thigh so it was secure. It bothered him greatly to be so aware of her missing leg, but he was impressed that she'd paid attention to that detail.

She hummed yet another tune as she finished putting the suit on, then softly began to add the lyrics as she put on the helmet with its face shield open but set to close automatically if necessary. "*This is the moment, this is the day when I send all my doubts and demons on their way. Every endeavour I have made, ever, is coming into play, is here and now today.*"

She picked up the imager again and bounced around with it until she landed in the shuttlecraft pilot's chair. She affixed the camera to the front console as she had in her first log, facing her as she continued to sing gently and sweetly while setting the controls on the consoles before her. "*This is the moment, this is the time when the momentum and the moment are in rhyme. Give me this moment, this precious chance. I'll gather up my past and make some sense at last,*" she sang out, her volume increasing as she leaned over to pull the shuttlecraft's door closed, sealing herself in.

Picard found himself sitting up straighter and leaning towards his terminal as the combination of the smaller acoustic space of the shuttlecraft and Anna's operatic volume captivated him entirely. *"This is the moment when all I've done, all of the dreaming, scheming, and screaming become one!"* she belted out.

He felt her determination, her spirit, the intensity of everything she was enduring poured out in her flawless song. *"This is the day! See it sparkle and shine! When all I've lived for becomes mine!"* She held the note so long that his own breath felt restricted, so he gasped in mixed relief and shame as she continued, *"For all these years I've faced the world alone, and now the time has come to prove to them I've made it on my own!"*

Tears began streaming down her face and into the neck support of the helmet as she continued to defiantly sing and tap the controls ahead of her. *"This is the moment! My final test! Destiny beckoned, I never reckoned second best! I won't look down. I must not fall. This is the moment, the sweetest moment of them all!"*

Picard could see her hands trembling as she buckled herself to the seat, tightening the straps firmly, realising she must've added those herself as they were not standard Starfleet issue. He also suddenly recalled her mentioning in her first log that her inertial dampeners were inoperative and he gripped the edge of his desk in sympathy for the physical turmoil she was about to endure.

"This is the moment! Damn all the odds! This day, or never, I'll sit forever with the gods! When I look back I will always recall, moment for moment..."

The Baltimore's computer began a ten second countdown, barely audible above Anna's singing, the numbers cold and hard beats amidst her long, warbling notes.

"Ten. Nine. Eight."

"...this was the moment..."

"Seven. Six. Five."

"...the greatest moment..."

"Four. Three. Two."

"...of them all!"

“One. Launch sequence initiated,” the computer said as Anna’s warbling note blurred into a scream.

The Baltimore shook violently as it took off and punched its way through the enticingly transparent yet aeronautically chaotic thermobaric storms that surrounded the planet. The shuttlecraft filled with bright light, and Anna squeezed her eyes shut, still screaming yet still somehow attached to that last note. The booming sounds of the rattling ship combined with the sound of her terror to have Picard on the edge of his seat, heart pounding, nearly panicking for her safety despite knowing all of this was years in the past and she’d come through it just fine. Something about her singing made it a performance, a compelling drama that he’d been dragged into, carried along up with her through shearing winds that threatened to rip the ship and her to pieces.

Then all at once, it stopped. The familiar hum of an operational starship was practically silence compared to the previous cacophony. Picard held his breath because Anna was holding hers. Her mouth hung open and her eyes darted wildly all around as he stared at her, frozen in his own rapt attention.

Finally she let out a breath and he did as well. She laughed, he followed suit. She laughed again, more loudly, putting her hands over her heart. He sat back in his chair and slumped.

“I did it,” she whispered.

“Yes, you most certainly did,” Picard replied.

“I really did it.”

Picard wiped a tear of his own away.

“I’m in outer space again,” she said bemusedly.

Picard laughed.

Anna peered out her window and blinked several times, then looked concerned. “Jiminy Crickets, I forgot how dark it was.” She shuddered, and he suddenly felt a sympathetic chill. Then she turned to the imager and smiled. He once again saw his mother’s expression in Anna’s, provoking a profound sense of encompassing warmth throughout his entire being. “Someone out there has to be proud of me now, right?” she asked. “For this? All of this?”

“Oh yes,” he answered her, voice quaking. “Very much.”

She sat there for a moment beaming with pride, giving her shoulders a little wiggle of it, then reached over and ended the log.

Picard let out a long sigh as he slumped forward and put his head in his hands. Once again, she'd exhausted him. And once again, he felt a dire compulsion to go see her, this time to answer her in person to say that he was indeed proud of her, that everybody who ever saw this would be proud of her, related to her or not. If this had been the log of a member of his crew, he'd be putting in for commendations, yet in this case he was barred from even the slightest communication of celebration with her.

Slowly, he lifted his head, feeling like it weighed ten times the usual amount. He leaned forward and pulled the chip out of the terminal, tossing it to the side. *Are all of her logs going to be this long and exhausting? Is this how she talks all the time still? Is working with her like going through the entire Wagner Ring Cycle on fast playback every day? Good heavens, I can't imagine what it must be like down there in engineering if this is what she's like all the time!*

He dragged himself out of his chair and began preparing for bed, wondering if he'd ever have the chance to find out in person, and if he was even capable of enduring such a chaotic force.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Stardate 47191.7 (Wednesday 11/03/2370, 23:27) — Deck Twelve
— Holodeck Eight

Not long after Picard had wondered if Anna was always so loud and boisterous, she was quite the opposite as she began to once again climb through Jefferies tubes with Data on their way back to the saucer section. This time they emerged on Deck Twelve, directly across from the entrance to the holodeck Data had booked. Instead of lingering outside to choose a program, Data showed Anna in and noted her visible relief once the door had closed behind them.

She then began to look around the room with an increasingly delighted expression. “I read up on the tech for this today once you said you’d booked the slot,” she said. “I’ve seen the specs before, but I’ve never been inside one. It’s big.”

“This is one of our smaller rooms, but it can appear much larger once a program is running.”

“Mhm, I read that too. Hard to imagine, though. It sounds like magic.”

“Have you decided on what sort of program you would like to try?”

Anna shook her head. “I tried, but the choice was too overwhelming. I mostly just want to see what it can do.”

“More or less anything you wish it to. There are many programs available, with editing suites here on this deck plus a full hologram creation lab on Deck Thirty-Five, though Starfleet rules about content creation are more restrictive than those for the general public.”

Anna blinked in confusion. “Why?”

“Primarily because much of the unrestricted content is...of an adult nature.”

“Oh,” Anna said, then wrinkled her nose. “Ew. So people do...all kinds of things in here?”

“Starfleet rules prohibit release of particular biological materials in a starship holodeck environment.”

Anna pulled a face and shuddered. “Let’s think about something nicer. Butterflies? Can I have butterflies in here?”

“Certainly. Computer, create a butterfly.”

“Specify parameters.”

“Randomised,” Data replied.

A small, bright yellow butterfly appeared in the middle of the room, fluttering idly in small circles.

“Oh!” Anna exclaimed and slowly approached it, reaching out her right hand. The butterfly flitted around her for a moment, then landed on her arm. Anna squeaked but stood very, very still. It remained in place for a moment, then took off again. She turned and grinned at him. “How many can we make?”

“As many as you wish.”

Anna bounced giddily, clasped her hands together and said, “Computer, create a hundred random butterflies.”

The computer beeped and suddenly the air was full of bright, fluttering colours.

Anna gasped. “This is the greatest thing ever in the history of the universe! I want to live in here forever and ever!”

“Unfortunately, our time slot expires at 0100, but you are welcome to return any time a slot is available.”

Anna spun around slowly, trailing her fingers through the air over and under the butterflies. “I suppose it’s good to force me return to reality or else I’d get happily lost in here.” She turned back to him and asked, “How high can we make things appear to be?”

“As high as you wish. The projection will alter itself based on your location to give the illusion of depth far beyond the actual ceiling, and move in an apparent three-dimensional manner to accommodate any required motion.”

“So I could make the interior of the Baltimore and my ropes and silks to climb?”

“If you wish, but would you not find that...traumatic?”

Anna giggled briefly at a butterfly right in front of her nose, and then replied, “Maybe, I don’t know. It was awful but it was the only home I knew for so long. Sometimes I miss parts of it.”

“It would take time to create that level of an immersive environment, and we are about to be quite busy with the new drive installation, but after that is completed I could schedule some time to show you how to build it.”

“I’d like that, assuming I’m allowed to stay on,” she said in an uncertain manner.

“Geordi has made it clear to me that he’d like to entice you to remain on board for as long as possible.”

She smiled at him warmly in that particularly compelling way. He stepped closer to her so he was in the cloud of butterflies with her, recording the entire moment to his long-term memory.

“Do you suppose the computer knows about aerial silks already?” she asked hopefully. “Can we make things that appear to hang from the ceiling and bear weight?”

“Yes, you can make fully functional climbing materials. Computer, is there a program for ‘aerial silk’?”

“*Specify length and colour,*” the computer replied.

“Oh, um, from floor to ceiling in here,” Anna said. “And blue. That’s my favourite colour.”

Two thick bolts of blue fabric appeared, draping down from the ceiling, their bottoms gently brushing the floor. The butterflies hurried out of the way of the sudden cloth.

“Oh goodness, the poor butterflies!” Anna said with a sympathetic little laugh. “Maybe we should put them away for now.”

“Computer, remove butterflies,” Data ordered, and they disappeared.

“Have you ever used these?” Anna asked, taking one of the silks in hand.

“I have not. I am entirely unfamiliar with them.”

She grinned. “Then let me show you.” She removed her shoe from her biological foot, and then tugged at her right thigh to disengage her artificial leg and kick it to the side. “I used ropes to go up and down the Baltimore for years before I found out about these. They’re meant for all sorts of acrobatic dancing. I can’t do a lot of that because so much of it requires two proper feet, but I learned to do this and it’s so much nicer on my hands,” she said as she locked her knees around the cloth and pulled herself up by her arms to quickly rise up the fabric.

Data could see how such climbing must have helped build her arm strength to allow her to ascend ladders in her her unique way.

“I had to learn my own way to do it all, but it feels like the most natural way to get around and I’ve really missed it, especially this part,” she said as she performed a fast series of folds, wraps, and knots of the two hanging silks to make herself a hammock. She giggled and sighed happily as she curled up in the width of the fabric. “I slept like this a lot once I learned how to do it safely. I could climb to one of the sideways consoles or conduits, work on it, have a nap, then work some more. Wanna try?”

“I do not sleep, but I am intrigued by the physics of the cloth.”

“Pick your favourite colour and climb up here with me and I’ll show you how,” she said as she nestled in deeper.

“I do not have a favourite colour, but since blue is your favourite: computer, create aerial silks to match the existing pair but in a darker shade of blue.” Once they appeared, he attempted to replicate her movements but discovered it was more difficult than it looked.

Anna peeked out from her perch to gently instruct him on the proper direction for wrapping his foot, and soon he was able to climb to the same height. She then undid her hammock to show him step-by-step how to form his own, and soon they were both hanging idly in the air.

“We can make anything else in here with us, right?” Anna asked dreamily.

“Most things, yes.”

“Computer, make us a landscape with random trees around, and grass below, and a blue, blue, blue sky above, and make it look like the silks go up into the sky beyond what we can see.”

The holodeck obliged and created a lovely summery scene for them to literally hang around in.

“Oh my, that’s a dream come true right there,” Anna said. “Computer, bring back the butterflies, please. And some birds in the trees. And a light breeze blowing around, but a warm one.” When it all came to be, she said, “If heaven existed, this would be it, don’t you think?”

“I am aware of many different concepts of a positive afterlife. I can see how this one would be appealing,” Data replied.

“Can we spend the rest of our time in here today like this, just talking about whatever pops into our heads?”

Data adjusted his position so he could better see Anna smiling at him over the edge of her hammock. “That would be a very pleasant experience,” he replied.

“Yay!” she said with a giggle. “Tell me more things like you did in the arboretum, please. Nice stories about good people.”

“I have many of those,” he replied, and then began to tell her more about the people that meant the most to him while carefully omitting those he suspected would upset her.



Stardate 47193.2 (Thursday 12/03/2370, 12:14) — Main Engineering

Anna attempted to creep quietly into main engineering, but the moment she peeked out of the vertical tube she heard David Sorenson’s voice cheerily boom out, “Here she is, Commander!”

Aisling turned, saw her, and hurried over to say, “You’re the hit of the day with those mats of yours.”

David grinned from across the central console. “Everyone’s calling them whiteslides now. You’re going to be famous.”

“Despite them being neither white nor slides,” Ensign Taurik said flatly as he worked on the far end of the console.

“Doesn’t matter,” David said. “Someone said it and it stuck. That’s how humans name things. Go look at most place names on Earth and adjust for ancient translation.”

Taurik raised an eyebrow briefly but made no other reply, prompting David to laugh in his usual boisterous manner.

Aisling told her, “We kept running out the other day so we had some of the ensigns on night duty replicate a bunch of them and distribute them to Jefferies junctions around the whole ship.”

“Oh. Um. Good?” Anna replied uncertainly.

Aisling laughed, then sighed. “Only a matter of time before my kid discovers them.”

“How old is she?” Anna asked, worried she might be in trouble if children started using them.

“Three going on thirty.”

Anna put her hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh, and then said, “Sorry. I think I remember my grandmother saying that same phrase about me.”

“Yeah, you and Aoife would be peas in a pod. I’d introduce you but the big boss here said we’re not allowed to do anything that’ll scare you off the ship, and Aoife can be...a lot,” Aisling explained as Geordi approached.

Geordi put his hands on his hips. “Yeah, how about we keep Aoife away from Anna until at least after the new core’s installed?”

Anna cringed slightly. “Is she...dangerous?”

Geordi and Aisling laughed, and David chortled behind them. Geordi explained, “Depends on how many questions you can take in a short period of time.”

Anna’s brow furrowed. “Is that all? I can handle a lot of those.”

Geordi considered for a moment, and then replied, “You know what, at the speed you can talk, you just might be able to take her on. But not today, because I’ve got someone who told me to

contact her on subspace the moment you came around today. Come on,” he said, heading towards the main entrance.

Anna turned to Aisling in concern, but the latter smiled encouragingly and waved her on, so she followed Geordi out of main engineering and to one of the small conference rooms down the corridor.

“Am I in trouble?” Anna asked.

“Far from it,” Geordi said with a chuckle. “You need to stop assuming that. Hang on, let me see if she’s available,” he said, tapping at the LCARS screen on the wall. A moment later he said, “Good, here she is,” and an older woman’s face appeared on the screen. “Commander Dekoker! As requested, I have Anna White here to talk to you.”

Anna’s eyes went wide; Beryl Dekoker was one of Starfleet’s most legendary engineers, and had been for long enough that Anna had studied her works on the Baltimore’s library that hadn’t been updated since they launched when she was four years old. Even as a child, Anna had loved to learn about Commander Dekoker’s discoveries and delighted in her video lectures, in no small part because she always wore the most fascinating, chunky-style necklaces and brightly coloured dresses instead of a standard uniform. She was immediately star-struck to see one of her heroes smiling at her through the screen.

“*Hello there, Specialist White,*” Dekoker said. “*I’m so pleased to meet you.*”

“Um, hi,” Anna replied breathlessly. The Commander’s warm smile made her want to simultaneously float on air and burst into nervous tears.

“I sent the Commander your specs for the whiteslides, and she’s a fan,” Geordi explained.

“*Well hardly just that, Commander La Forge,*” Dekoker said. “*I’m pretty impressed with Specialist White’s other work as well. But sometimes what seems like a small thing makes the biggest impact in our lives, and I must tell you what a profound impact your device has just made in my life.*”

Anna immediately thought of a thousand things she wanted to say, and thus could speak none of them.

Geordi asked, “You do know who Commander Dekoker is, right?”

Anna nodded and managed to squeak, “Uh-huh.”

He laughed a little and said, “I think we’re making her nervous with all of these formal titles.”

“Then I insist you call me Beryl and I’ll call you Anna, my dear, if that’s all right?”

Anna nodded again.

“Well, if you know me then you probably know I’m older than the hills. I’ll be one hundred and twenty-nine in just over six weeks. And do you know what happens to you constantly when you’re over a century old?”

“Um...no?” Anna said.

“Everybody expects you to retire, or at the very least to go teach at the Academy. Because somewhere around ninety or a hundred your knees start to really protest crawling around those cursed tubes regardless of what they give you in sickbay for it. So as it gets harder and harder to move your old bones around, they start hinting and then pushing that it’s time ‘to go take it easy back on Earth’. Problem is, I don’t want to. I teach plenty from here on the Valdemar. Maybe you’ve even seen some of my lectures?”

“Oh yes ma’am!” Anna answered emphatically, clasping her hands over her heart. “I know some by heart!”

“Oh Geordi, I do like her,” Dekoker said with a grin. “Anyway, he sent me the replicator spec for your new invention yesterday and I tried it last night. Worked like a dream,” she said, waving her hands emphatically. “I haven’t moved that easily through a Jefferies tube in decades. And no excess slippage at all. I felt entirely safe and stable, able to get around to my heart’s content for the first time in ages. Do you know what that means to me? It means the next time one of these meddling Admirals hints that it’s ‘time to come home’ I’m going to tell them to stuff it.”

Anna gaped in awe.

Dekoker laughed. *“When you’re my age with my credentials, they let you get away with it! Oh, but my dear, what you’ve created is significant, and I wanted you to hear it from me personally.”*

Anna could no longer hold tears back. “Thank you,” she said. “That means so much more to me than I know how to say.”

“Well, likewise, my dear. Now, I need to get back to a whole pile of new things I can do without getting the ensigns and lieutenants to help me anymore, which in and of itself is a liberation you youngsters cannot possibly comprehend. And I know you’re all preparing for your exciting new drive, which I am following with interest like everybody else. But I hope the Valdemar and the Enterprise have cause to cross paths sometime soon because one day I would like to thank you for this in person. You’re a bright, radiant star, my dear, and don’t you forget it.”

“Thank you,” Anna said, her voice wavering.

“All right then. Go shine on,” Dekoker said before ending the transmission.

Anna put her shaking hands over her face and let the tears flow over her fingertips.

“Okay,” Geordi said gently, leading her to the seats at the table behind them. “I figured this was next. You okay?”

“I don’t know,” Anna replied.

“Want some water or something?”

Anna shook her head.

“You’re going to have to get used to everybody loving you if you keep inventing amazing stuff, you know.”

A chill ran over Anna and she failed to suppress a shudder as she said, “Not everyone, believe me.”

“I think probably it’s a lot more people than you realise. Doctor Cortez kept you safe from too many enquiries but I think maybe that shielded you from a lot of respect you’re due as well. Hell, that Tarkanian scientist said to pass on his thanks for helping thwart the warriors in engineering and I hadn’t had a chance to tell you yet.”

Anna blinked at him in confusion.

Geordi laughed. “See? You don’t even realise half the admirers you have out there. And everyone’s going to admire you even more when you tell us all about the incoming core next week. How’s Monday for you? That’ll give us plenty of time before we get to Starbase 84.”

Anna shook her head and asked, “Wait, what? Monday for what?”

“Everyone’s been studying their bit for the installation but we need to have an all-hands meeting to make sure everyone’s up to speed on the big picture,” Geordi explained. “And you’re one of the team behind that picture. We’ll start with a run-down of all the upgrades we’ve completed, what’s left to be done, and explanations of how it all integrates together for the new pieces coming in. That way when we get to the Starbase, everyone will be on the same page with the same knowledge and expectations.”

“But...that’s...I mean it’s all in the spec documentation,” she protested.

“Right but it’s different talking it all out together.”

“I can’t,” she declared.

Geordi looked concerned. “You can’t? Why not?”

“I...that would be...I just...no.” She shook her head.

“Anna, it’s not the whole ship, just the engineers. People you’ve already met and talked to.”

“But they’ll all be there all at once. I can’t just get up and talk in front of a bunch of people!”

Geordi sympathetically said, “I think you can. And I’ll be there and Aisling and Data too, so it’s your friends, not strangers or anything.”

Anna cringed anyway and felt nauseated.

“You just impressed one of Starfleet’s best, Anna. You need to start seeing yourself in a bigger light.” When she shook her head again, he gently offered, “How about this: think about it and start planning a talk. You know this stuff backwards and forwards anyway, so just think about how to lay it out as if you were telling

someone unfamiliar with it, even though everyone here's at least familiar with the gist. I'll help you, and I'm sure Data will too."

Mention of Data got her to breathe again, but she remained with a dubious expression about the whole concept.

Geordi continued, "And then if it gets to the time and you really can't do it, nobody's going to force you. I'll deliver whatever you've got ready to go at that point. The thing is, it's important for everyone to see you're the expert here. I don't want to steal your thunder."

"You can have all my thunder," Anna blurted. "I don't even want thunder. Thunder means scary lightning and impending death."

He laughed kindly. "Okay then, I don't want to steal your spotlight. And when you speak, I'll be right there by your side. We'll put Data in the front row so you can pretend you're talking to just him if that helps."

Anna sighed and conceded, "That...might help. A bit. I don't know. I'm terrified."

"Yeah, I see that. I wouldn't have brought it up now if I'd realised it was going to spook you this much. But —"

"*Senior staff to the observation lounge,*" interrupted Worf's voice over Geordi's combadge.

"Acknowledged," Geordi replied over the comm. Then he said to Anna, "Just think about it and make some notes. Trust me, you'll get into the idea once you start going on it, and we're here to support you. Like Dekoker said, Anna, don't be afraid to shine."

Anna groaned.

"You going to be okay if I go up top?"

"I guess," she said.

"I can send Aisling in here to cheer you on, if that'd help."

Anna took a deep breath and sat up, despite still feeling dizzy at all that had been said. "No, I don't want to be trouble to anyone."

"You're not. She clearly loves doing that," Geordi said with an encouraging smile.

"I kind of want to go hide in my lab to think about it."

Geordi nodded. “Come on with me in the turbolift, then. You look like you feel sick and I don’t love the idea of you climbing up the tube like that. I’ll make sure you’re settled and then I’ll go see what’s going on upstairs.”

Anna reluctantly went with him, desperate to be inspired on how to be inspiring but worried at any moment everyone would see that she was neither and terrified of being held to account for everything she imagined she was lacking.



Stardate 47193.2 (Thursday 12/03/2370, 12:45) — Observation Lounge

As soon as La Forge entered, Riker began updating them all on the Raman’s situation. “Their mission is to take atmospheric samples at various levels. Their latest transmission as of less than an hour ago is that they appear to be able to continue the mission despite their engine trouble. I’ve also been in contact with HQ for more details and found out there’s a reason for this mission well beyond scientific curiosity: they’re investigating rumours that Marijne Seven’s atmosphere contains unique compounds that may be of ‘significant medical research interest’.”

“What sort of interest?” Crusher asked. “I haven’t heard anything about it.”

“Well that’s going to make this a short meeting,” Riker said, “since I was kind of hoping you could fill in the big blanks HQ left in their reply to me.”

“This all seems awfully clandestine for a science mission,” Picard remarked.

“Exactly,” Riker replied. “They’re acting like I’m asking for weapons and shield information over an open channel. ‘Significant medical research interest’ was the most I could get out of them.”

Picard shrugged. “‘Ours is not to reason why’ and all that, fair enough. But it would help to know if these compounds are dangerous to the Enterprise or could thwart any necessary rescue efforts.”

“Which is exactly how I put it to them,” Riker said. “Several times. Whatever it is, the Raman crew seem determined to keep on their task. I’m getting worried they’ll burn out whatever engines they have left going in and out of that atmosphere.”

Picard nodded. “We should be prepared for that. Mr. La Forge, are any of your preparations for the new warp core likely to hinder our current operations should we need to suddenly increase speed?”

“Not at all, Captain,” La Forge reassured him. “At this point everything’s just being improved and upgraded on the old spec, not affecting current drive operation any way other than possibly for the better. We’re doing extra scans, extra maintenance, extra everything so we don’t have to be saddled with those duties when all hands are needed for the switchover at Starbase 84.”

“At that point the engines will be offline for approximately twenty-four hours,” Data said. “Our current efforts are intended to minimise that down-time, and we anticipate returning to full and improved capacity by the following day.”

“Good to hear it,” Picard said. “What’s the status of your new interface suit development?”

“We’ve been running Geordi through virtual disaster simulations by connecting the suit to the holodeck’s imagery subsystem,” Crusher said. “So far it’s been going well, and as long as we keep to the safety parameters meant to protect him, I’m reasonably confident in the potential of the program.”

“But how can you be certain a virtual experience of a virtual environment will equate to the real world?” Picard asked. “Have you been performing these tests with holodeck safety limiters or without?”

“Both,” Data replied. “But we have also asked ourselves the same question. That is why I will be spending the overnight shift

setting up a real-world test scenario in Cargo Bay Eleven for use tomorrow. This test will include multiple hazardous elements, which is why I have also ensured that all adjoining rooms and corridors will be —“

“Yes, thank you Mr. Data, I am entirely certain you will manage it all to the utmost safety requirements for everyone and the ship. Number One, I’d like you to sit in on this test and evaluate if the suit and probe will likely be of use when we get to Marijne in the case of being unable to transport our crew aboard to assist with their engines.”

“Will do,” Riker replied.

“Let’s also ensure we have all standard rescue evacuation protocols in place,” Picard said. “We should anticipate an inability to transport the crew off though that sort of atmosphere, so I want shuttlecraft and pattern enhancers ready to deploy at a moment’s notice.” When they all nodded, he said, “Very good. Dismissed.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Stardate 47196.0 (Friday 13/03/2370, 13:10) — Deck Twenty-Five
— Cybernetics Lab A

One of the earliest sensory oddities Geordi had learned to sort out while in the interface suit was hearing the voices of his colleagues around his real self while all of his other senses were engaged with the input from the probe. Because his friends were there with his body and actual ears, they didn't sound like they were coming over a comm or subspace call. He'd gotten used to sorting out Data and the Doc's voices, but having the Commander in the room required a fresh re-adjustment.

So when Riker — who was in reality standing right in front of him — asked, “Geordi, have you found it yet?” it took him a second to remind himself who and what was where.

“Not yet,” Geordi replied as his virtual self encountered clouds of gas above his head. “I'm starting to get some fumes: ammonia, chlorine, potassium chloride.” He instinctively reached to adjust his uniform, having just climbed up a Jefferies tube ladder, but his hands were confused to find the exterior of the interface suit. *Focus*, he told himself. *Be in the probe, not in the lab.*

He climbed up the ladder further, delving directly into the gassy clouds in a way that his biological self never could. *I guess this is what Data feels like, not having to breathe*, he thought, but in the next moment he couldn't help but cough anyway. He forced himself to focus again and climbed up to the next landing. “Oh, I can feel the heat from here,” he reported as he transferred to a horizontal tube. Crawling along, he briefly wished he had one of Anna's mats, but then realised he didn't need it because he wasn't actually crawling and his knees didn't feel a thing despite his expectation that they would.

“There it is,” Geordi said as he spotted the fire. It bothered him more than previous tests because knowing those were on the holodeck had indeed reduced the sense of danger. He was completely confident that Data had set this all up safely, but seeing a real fire on his ship still set off all of his chief engineer alarm bells. The sense of urgency was much more acute, which made this much more useful practice.

“How far?” Riker asked.

“About ten metres up the ODN line. Boy, it’s hot. I’d say over two thousand degrees,” he said, loving how the probe’s sensors fed him that direct information. “I’m going in.”

He crawled further through the tube to reach the fire, stood upright, and then began to pull the controls in front of him. Reaching through the flames was exhilarating, like being a real-life superhero from the comics his sister had read to him when he was little before his first VISOR. A burst of cold fog opened above him and he reported, “We’re okay. I’ve activated the emergency suppression system.”

“All his vital functions are completely normal,” he heard Crusher report nearby, and he didn’t dare tell her that he felt like his heart was both pounding with excitement and swelling with pride.

“The interface unit is operating within expected parameters,” Data said.

Riker asked, “Why did he start coughing when he went through the gasses?”

“Psychosomatic response,” Crusher replied.

“I feel like I’m actually here,” he explained to Riker. “I mean there, in the Jefferies tube. It’s funny: when I saw the smoke, I couldn’t help but cough.”

“No one else has reported so complete a sensory experience,” Data remarked.

“The interface is perfect for Geordi because his visor inputs allow the probe to transmit information directly into his cerebral cortex,” Crusher told Riker.

Damn right it does, Geordi thought. *I can do anything in this thing.*

Riker said, “It looks like this is going to work. Geordi, I’d like to get the probe out of that training Jefferies tube and onto the launch bay before we reach Marijne Seven.”

“Will do,” Geordi said, perfectly happy to stay in the suit and let the probe wander through the Enterprise. But suddenly he was stuck. “Wait a minute. Something’s wrong. Can’t get my left leg to work,” he said, trying to force his leg to continue down the ladder but unable to make the probe move along at all.

“What is it?” Riker asked.

“The probe is designed to respond to any movement Geordi intends to make. When his brain sends a message to move his leg, the interface should move the probe instead,” Crusher explained.

“Apparently the tactile sensors are too low. I will increase the input,” Data said.

A moment later, the feeling that his leg was stuck disappeared and Geordi was able to proceed. “There it goes. I’m on my way down.” He took the probe down through the Jefferies tube facade out into the cargo bay, opened the cargo bay door to the corridor, and proceeded along just as he had in his own body so many times before in what felt like completely natural movement.

Meanwhile Riker asked, “Why the body suit?”

“It provides tactile sensations so that Geordi can feel he’s in the same environment as the probe,” Data replied.

It really does feel like that, he thought as he turned down another corridor. But then he caught a glimpse of a reflection in a wall panel and paused to look at it.

“Geordi, what’s wrong?” Crusher asked.

“Nothing,” he replied with a grin. “I’m seeing my reflection in a panel. I forgot what a handsome guy I am.” He chuckled at his own cleverness and then resumed the journey to the launch bay, secretly hoping he’d pass by some crewmates who would be amused and maybe even one or two who he wished were a little more intimidated by him.



Stardate 47203.7 (Monday 16/03/2370, 08:45) — Anna's Lab

Anna sat in her lab with her head in her hands, elbows on the table, deliberately breathing deeply so she wouldn't succumb to panic. Geordi and Data had both helped her work on her presentation over the past couple of days, and when they were around it all seemed very easy. She did indeed know all of this information inside-out and backwards, so talking to them about it was natural.

But the very idea of having to get up in front of everyone else from engineering made her feel like she was about to be dunked into the deepest part of the ocean and might never be able to breathe again.

Data had told her that he had heard it can be helpful to imagine the audience is in their undergarments, but she'd wrinkled her nose at him in disgust. Now, the very notion of a bunch of human men sitting at her in their underpants leering at her set her on the edge of a full-blown panic.

She closed her eyes again and breathed away the urge to vomit. She hadn't eaten since the night before as a precaution against throwing up in front of everyone, but that didn't stop her stomach from giving it a go. Warm saliva filled her mouth as it always did just before she was sick, which made the sensation sickening in and of itself, so she took another tiny sip of the very cold water she had on the table beside her.

A song, she thought. I need a song for this. What's a song about being too nervous to -

Before she could finish the thought, the spinning introductory notes of "Getting Married Today" from *Company* filled her head and she muttered along with it, altering the words to her own situation as she so often did. The words spilled out of her in a rapid

patter, faster than the actual song as recorded. *“Pardon me is everybody here because if everybody’s here I’d like to thank you all for coming to engineering I’d appreciate you going even more I mean you must have lots of better things to do and not a word of it to Geordi remember Geordi you know the man I’m going to impress but I’m not because I can’t impress anyone as engineering as he is thank you all for the PADDs and the tricorders thank you all now it’s back to the corridors don’t tell Geordi but I’m not giving a speech today.”*

As the calmer countering portion of the song played in her mind, she grudgingly stood up and moved towards her lab’s door. But then she found herself standing still in the hall, whispering to herself, *“Listen everybody look I don’t know what you’re waiting for a speech what’s a speech it’s a torturous ritual where nobody wants to be there and nobody wants to listen it’s maybe the most horrifying thing I ever heard of when it’s followed by some questions when suddenly they’re realise they’re saddled with a fake and want to kill me like they should.”*

She found herself getting into the turbolift as if on autopilot, and once inside continued to whisper-sing, *“Thanks a bunch but I’m not going to speak now, go have lunch because I’m not going to speak now, you’ve been grand but I’m not going to speak now, don’t just sit there I’m not going to speak now, and don’t tell Geordi but I’m not giving a speech today.”*

The turbolift door opened out to Deck Seventeen even though she didn’t recall asking it to. She did recall Geordi saying to come to the large engineering crew lounge at the pinched fore end of this deck, but had no idea how her legs were carrying her there.

This deck was small compared to others, just under the latch points to the saucer section at the narrow top of the drive section, so she could easily hear the din of people gathering in the space ahead of her. Sure enough as she approached, all the familiar faces were there, milling around and chatting, some smiling at her politely as she passed.

Anna had no idea if she was responding to them with a smile or a grimace of horror. She felt numb and sick all over, and in her mind sung, *“Listen everybody I’m afraid you didn’t hear or do you want to see a crazy lady fall apart in front of you it isn’t only Geordi who’d be ruining his career you know we’ll all of us be losing our identities I’d telephone my shrink but I threw that jerk away and by tonight I’ll be floating out in space with the other garbage I’m not well so I’m not going to speak now, you’ve been swell but I’m not going to speak now, clear the hall because I’m not going to speak now, thank you all but I’m not going to speak now and don’t tell Geordi but I’m not going to speak today.”*

“Hey there you are,” Geordi said, suddenly standing beside her. “I can see how nervous you are, but you’re going to be fine. We’ve reserved Data’s seat in the front row, so you just tell it all to him like we planned, okay?” he said as he directed her to the one-step-up little stage at the far end of the room, past the chairs set up in rows. “And I’ll be right here beside you. Everything’s going to be okay, I promise.”

She couldn’t even look at him directly. All Anna could do was stare at the windows facing the direction they were headed — wherever that was — with the bright lights of warp-blurred distant stars streaking by. She suddenly wished an asteroid or something would be in the way, something the deflector couldn’t deflect and would wipe out this whole room in an instant, too fast to even feel it; just a flash and be done with all of this terror.

Anna felt Geordi gently pat her shoulder, and resisted the urge to sing aloud, keeping it in her head instead. *“Look I didn’t want to have to tell you but I may be coming down with hepatitis and I think I’m gonna faint so if you want to watch me faint I’ll do it happily but wouldn’t it be funnier to go and watch a funeral? So thank you for the twenty-seven info slides and thirty-seven output graphs and forty-seven node improvements and fifty-seven plasma conduits — “*

“Hey Anna?” came another voice from the other side.

Anna turned and saw Aisling standing there with a sympathetic smile. She nearly burst into tears, but held her breath instead, hoping to faint and be carried off to a torpedo tube to be blasted back in the direction of Earth.

“Okay, come here with me,” Aisling said, taking her off the stage to the side. “Right. Breathe,” she said in a way that was clearly a maternal order and not a request.

Anna obeyed, though it was ragged. Her hands started to shake, and Aisling took ahold of them, but she snatched her left one away instinctively and hid it behind her back.

Aisling blinked at the strange, sudden motion, but then shook it off and held Anna’s right hand between her own. “Anna, if you want to leave right now just say the word and I will take you out of here and make Geordi do this himself. You don’t have to do this.”

Anna turned her head towards the long room’s entrance and saw Data enter. Her next breath came with significantly greater ease. Between Aisling letting her off the hook and Data’s approach, something in her ticked over, like a switch thrown. *I can do this*, she thought, immediately both terrified of and exhilarated at the notion.

She turned back to Aisling and replied, “I think I can. I don’t know. I want to but...it’s hard.”

“Okay. Would it help if everyone wasn’t all staring at you at the same time?”

“Oh, I wish!”

“I can make that happen. Tell me what else you need.”

“I don’t know. I feel dizzy.”

“There’s already water here, look,” Aisling said, pointing to the little table to the side of the large panel screen. “Want some? It’ll help.”

“I might throw up.”

Aisling considered that, and then suggested, “That might not be so bad if you can aim it at Dean.”

A little burst of laughter shocked Anna as it came out of her own face. She pulled her hand out of Aisling's and covered her mouth.

Aisling grinned back at her. "Gotcha. You're going to be fine now, you'll see." She patted Anna on the arm and walked back over the stage, calling out to the engineers who were taking their seats, "Hey everyone! Hiemstra protocol!"

Immediately, about two thirds of the engineers deliberately turned their faces away in random directions, some looking at their hands, some at the ceiling, some at the port and starboard walls.

Anna started at them in bafflement until Geordi came up alongside her again to explain, "Hiemstra's a physics prof at the Academy. Great guy, everybody loves him, but he can't take it if too many people look at him all at once. So in his lectures we all avoid looking directly at him unless there's a reason to."

"Oh," Anna said. "That's kind of sweet."

"Yeah, that was a good idea for Aisling to call for it like that. We're on your side, Anna. We really, really are. Go sit on that chair over there. I'm going to get this started with some preliminary stuff and then ease you into it. You're going to be great, I promise."



At the same time up on the bridge, Worf reported, "We are receiving another incoming transmission from the Raman."

"On screen," Picard replied.

A moment passed and viewscreen remained dark. Worf grumbled, "The video stream is failing to connect, Audio is only partially available."

"Put up what you can, Mr. Worf."

"Yes sir."

The screen lit up with an array of static lines and flickering bars. Audio tinged with echos and feedback erratically spurted, "*...prise, we...tack...terminated...no...attempted commun...unable...*"

Then clear sounds of screaming could be heard, followed by several beats of empty sound.

“The transmission has ended,” Worf announced.

Picard stood. “Helm, increase to warp eight.”

“Aye sir,” came the reply.

Picard turned to Troi and Riker. “Opinions?”

Troi shook her head slowly. “It’s hard to tell. I’m not getting anything more than any of you in terms of emotional content.”

“It’s pretty obvious they were scared, and I think telling us they were under attack,” Riker said.

“Scared, yes, but I think also attempting to communicate with someone other than us,” Troi surmised.

“Go over the message and see if you can get any more out of it,” Picard said to Troi. “And where’s Data? Get him to help you clean it up if he can.”

Riker said, “Engineering is having an all-hands meeting about the new drive.”

Troi stood to go to one of the science consoles, but first very carefully said to Picard, “Their new specialist is giving a talk and as I understand it, Data is assisting her with that.”

Picard nodded slowly. “I see. Given that we can’t push up to maximum warp this far out, we’ll let them continue with their meeting uninterrupted.”

“I think that would be best,” Troi said.

Picard said to Riker, “But send Data a message to come to the bridge as soon as their meeting is concluded.”

“Understood.”

Picard turned back to the viewscreen, now showing their adjusted ETA. “We’ll go to warp nine when we’re twelve hours out to take a day off of that, but there’s no point in burning out our engines if we’re supposed to be saving them from theirs.” He sighed and returned to his seat, where he muttered, “I have a bad feeling about this, Number One.”

“So do I. I think it just became officially too late no matter how fast we go from here.”

“Merde,” Picard whispered under his breath, hating the feeling of being too far away to help.



Stardate 47203.8 (Monday 16/03/2370, 09:20) — Deck Seventeen
— Engineering Conference Lounge

Anna attempted to listen to Geordi’s introduction to the meeting but the closer the inevitable time when she’d have to speak came, the less she could think clearly about anything useful at all. Her earlier self-declaration that she could do this had evaporated despite seeing both Data and Aisling in the front row. Her palms felt greasy, her knees felt wobbly, and her stomach was doing flips. Then Geordi’s voice started to sound weird and distant, almost like an echo.

No, not like an echo, she thought. Like underwater, like hearing music if I put my head right under the shower head. At least I think that’s what it sounds like to be underwater. I’ve never been underwater. I’m terrified of ever being underwater. All that water over me, swallowing me up. They say drowning is horribly painful and I believe it, because right now I can hardly breathe and that hurts enough even with air all around. What if the ship crashed into an ocean? Would these windows hold? Would we drown right here in this room because it feels like I’m drowning right now and

—
“So please everyone give a very kind welcome to our favourite inventor of Jefferies tubes mats and oh yeah, that whole new drive protocol thing: Anna White,” Geordi said, his voice burbling through her imaginary immersion.

A smattering of polite and encouraging applause followed, but to Anna it sounded like a rush of people coming at her. *How horrible it must have been to live in some medieval village and hear soldiers running at you, knowing they were coming to kill you*

and burn your homes and that's if you were lucky because probably if you were a woman or even a girl they'd —

“Anna, it’s okay, come on,” Geordi said, suddenly in front of her, reaching out to her. “I’m staying right by your side.”

Part of her wanted to shout a warning that the soldiers would trample him or that the waves would drown him too, but none of that made sense because absolutely nothing made sense or ever would again, as far as Anna was concerned.

And yet somehow she stood and went with him to the middle of the little stage. Somehow she looked out at the sea of faces and saw how they immediately turned to the large screen behind her left side instead of staring at her.

They're being nice, she thought. There are no soldiers. There is no wave. Why would I even think those things right now? Why am I like this? I need to say something because they're being nice and I'm the awful one here if I don't say something.

So she blurted out the same recitation about trellium-C/D interphasic fusion that she’d used in her rapid-speech game with Data a couple of weeks before, but this time even faster, making it nearly incomprehensible to anyone other than Data, who sat there with a polite, encouraging smile.

An awkward hush fell over the room. Anna could see that most of the audience was confused, their brows all furrowed as they tried to unpick anything intelligible from her word vomit.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, feeling like the water was flooding back into the room after all. “I’m really bad at this.”

“No, you’re not,” came Aisling’s voice like a lifeline. “You’re really new at this, and you’re just so good at what you’re trying to say that it spills out easily. It’s okay.”

“You’re doing fine,” came another female voice came from the back; Anna wasn’t even sure who it was.

“Yeah, just say it slower,” Sorenson said in an uncharacteristically soft tone. “It’s all good.”

On the verge of tears, Anna turned to Data who simply nodded at her. *He's so calm, she thought. So still, like he's the eye of this*

storm, and if I anchor onto him I can get through it because he's my point of shelter. “Okay,” she said. “Sorry. I’ll start again.”

Looking directly at Data, she began to carefully lay out the technology for the new drive system as she’d practised with him over the past couple of days. Once she got into the flow of it, the pleasing logic of the science came over her like a comfortable, familiar blanket, calming her and helping her do what she’d been naturally doing for most of her life: talking to herself about warp drives and plasma manifolds and to how make ships go safely through space.

When she got to the part explaining the new construction process for the components, she said, “What’s probably new to most of you is the actual interphasic welding methodology so that’s what Geordi wanted me to get into in more depth. It’s a much more complicated and dangerous process than the old phase-transition welding, so —“

“It’s not really that complicated,” came a bored-sounding voice from the middle of the room. Every head turned — including Anna’s — to see Dean Covett sitting there with a smug expression and arms crossed.

But instead of being intimidated by him as usual, Anna was annoyed at the interruption. She looked down at the floor, took a deep breath, and then tried to get back into her flow. “Anyway, a lot of it is automated to spare us from having to get too close because —“

“Some of us aren’t afraid of a little hard work,” Covett heckled again.

Anna could see Geordi in her peripheral vision, his hands on his hips and his head shaking in warning at Dean. She also saw Aisling’s posture change and knew she wasn’t the only one getting angry, which made her angrier still. Somehow having the people she cared about upset was worse than her own feelings about it.

As dispassionately as she could, Anna said, “You should be afraid of how being anywhere near an interphasic operation would kill you dead, dead, dead.”

“We’re Starfleet officers. We know how to do things safely,” Dean replied with a wide grin.

He’s getting to me and he knows it, she thought, wanting to ignore him but knowing she couldn’t, so she snapped in rapid fire, “A Tellarite researcher in the development team on Starbase 84 was standing about fifty metres away from the process back when they thought that thirty metres was safe enough. He was pulled in by the fluctuating gravity fields. His body was slammed in and out of phase for nearly two whole minutes before they could stop the process and get him out. It’s estimated that he survived — conscious and in agony — for about thirty to forty-five seconds of that, feeling his entire body being pounded to bits and smashed back together repeatedly until he finally jellified.”

The entire audience started at her in shock and horror. This information had not been made fully public; Anna only knew it because of special access to the research team’s notes via Doctor Cortez.

But Anna barely noticed the others as she glared directly at Covett. “But if you think you’re tough enough to try it instead of leaving it to the robotic assembly, feel free to give it a go, Mr. Starfleet.”

Her words hung in the air in the ensuing silence and Covett withered beneath them.

But then a lighter voice from the back muttered, “Yeah, Dean. Go for it,” and caused a ripple of laughter to flow through the room.

Humiliated, Covett sneered but sank further down into his chair.

Anna stood up a little straighter, and then stopped looking at him for the remainder of the talk. “This is why the process now uses the waster rods you can see here,” she said, pointing to the diagram on the screen. “Even the robotic arms can’t take too much of the interphasic exposure for long. Experiments are ongoing with building new assembly materials out of interphasic materials

themselves, but we won't get to see those in action at the Starbase just yet."

Anna switched to the next diagram on the screen. "The interphasic welding increases rapid return to original shape during elastic deformation and reduces plastic deformation to minimise gaps and material fatigue, all while maintaining enough overall flexibility to avoid becoming brittle under both stress and strain. As you can see from these graphs, the difference is pretty stark. It's not just that we can make things in bigger pieces with fewer joins that can work themselves into flaws, but those materials that can undergo the process become more robust and able to bear more long-term use. Or, in the case of going to warp nine, abuse," she added with a little shrug.

More light laughter spread through the room; engineers generally disliked their engines being pushed to maximum warp unless it was to show off under their own terms. Anna suddenly understood that most of them were truly on her side, that Covett's attempt to knock her off course or turn anyone against her had failed. For the first time during her speech, she smiled.

I really can do this, she thought, and continued happily babbling about her favourite technological topics to her receptive and supportive audience.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Stardate 47215.5 (Friday 20/03/2370, 15:46) — Bridge

As soon as the Enterprise came out of warp at Marijne Seven, Picard asked, “Life signs?”

La Forge shook his head, seated at a science console at the aft of the bridge with Riker, Picard, and Data surrounding him. “Our biosensors are useless. There’s too much interference in the atmosphere.”

Riker asked, “Any further hint as to what they were doing out here?”

Data replied, “Only what you have previously stated yourself, sir: the Raman was to descend to the lower atmosphere, eleven thousand kilometres below its current position. The crew was to sample the atmosphere at that level, and then return to a safer orbit.”

La Forge said, “Something must have happened down there. Maybe the shields failed, or they had some kind of inversion reaction in the nacelles.”

“That wouldn’t explain that last communication we received from them,” Riker replied. “The crew might still be alive. There’s no way we can tell from up here.”

“Here’s to hoping, Number One. Mr. La Forge, will the probe be able to transmit through that interference?”

Data answered, “The probe sends information via a focused particle beam. It should be able to cut through the interference.”

“But we may have to operate the probe at close to tolerance levels,” La Forge added.

“Hm. Will your nervous system be able to handle that much sensory input?” Picard asked.

“We’ve already tested the interface at about seventy percent tolerance,” La Forge said confidently.

Riker nodded. “We shouldn’t have any trouble going higher. The safety override will kick in at about ninety eight percent tolerance, and that’ll disengage the interface.”

From behind them at the tactical station, Worf reported, “Captain, I am receiving a transmission from Starfleet Command. Admiral Holt.”

Picard replied, “In my ready room.” Then he turned back to the others. “The seven people on that ship are our first priority. Is the probe ready for launch?”

Data said, “Yes sir.”

“Send it directly to the aft section of the Raman through the secondary air lock. That should put it just one bulkhead away from the bridge.”

The others all nodded and La Forge stood. “I’ll interface with the probe as soon as it’s ready and in position.”

“Make it so.”



Picard tapped his terminal on as he sat down and smiled at his old friend. “Hello, Marcus.”

“*Jean-Luc*,” came the warm reply.

“How’s life on DS3?”

Holt shrugged. “*We’re hosting this year’s palio. The Ferengi have already been accused of trying to bribe the Breen pilot into throwing the race.*”

Picard chuckled. “There’s nothing unusual about that.”

“*Nothing at all*,” Holt said with a smile, but then it faded. “*I wish I could say I was just calling to catch up on things. Nine days ago, the Hera left here on a routine courier mission. We were in contact with them for five of those days. Then the ship disappeared without a trace.*”

“The Hera?” Picard asked, a sinking feeling coming over him.

“*I’m afraid so. The Excelsior and the Noble have been retracing its course for the last seventy two hours. Nothing. I’m*

going to keep them at it for another seventy two. But to be honest, I don't think another week would make any difference."

Picard's expression fell. "I'll inform Commander La Forge."

Holt nodded and ended the transmission.

Picard sighed. Delivering this sort of news was the worst part of the job, but he always believed that it should be presented by a friendly face whenever possible. He stood, adjusted his uniform, looked out the window for a moment, and then strode out of his ready room to uphold this sacred duty.



Stardate 47215.5 (Friday 20/03/2370, 15:56) — Deck Twenty-Five
— Cybernetics Lab A

La Forge and Data had barely begun their preparations in the lab when the door opened and the Captain entered. They both turned to him in puzzlement.

"Mr. Data, I'd like a word with Commander La Forge."

A new formality suddenly hung in the air. Geordi stood up straighter.

Data replied, "Aye sir," turned to Geordi to say, "I will be on the bridge," and then left immediately.

Picard softened his voice as he stepped up onto the platform. "Geordi, I've just spoken with Starfleet. The Hera is missing."

Geordi's hands sank to his sides. "Missing?" he asked, and then tenuously added, "My mother?"

"Captain La Forge has disappeared along with the rest of her crew."

Geordi gulped and took a deep breath, unsteady on his feet.

"Perhaps you should take a moment to —" Picard began.

But Geordi cut him off to say, "Thank you sir. I'm going to...I need to..." and began walking towards the door.

“Yes of course. I’ll keep you apprised if I hear anything further.”

Geordi left the room without another word. Picard sighed again, rubbed at his forehead for a moment, then headed back up to the bridge so he could let Troi and Riker know what was going on.



Stardate 47215.6 (Friday 20/03/2370, 16:40) — La Forge’s Quarters

Geordi sat slightly slumped at his desk in his quarters, rewatching his mother’s last subspace transmission on his terminal.

“I saw your father last week and your sister about ten days before that. I decided I missed my favourite son,” Captain La Forge said.

“Your only son, Ma,” Geordi replied drolly.

“You’re going to have to see the Hera again. We’ve got a lot of new faces on board, including a chief engineer who juices up the nacelles every chance she gets. I think she’s the best technician in the fleet.” His mother paused, then grinned. *“Okay, second best.”*

There was a chime at his door so he leaned forward to pause the playback. “Come in.”

Riker entered, then noticed what was on the screen. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were —“

“Don’t worry about it,” Geordi said and then continued the video.

“Maybe you should meet her. We’re going to be in the same sector next week. Take a shuttle over and I’ll introduce you.”

“My mother’s always trying to find me a wife,” Geordi explained.

“But if you’re too busy, I’ll see you at your father’s birthday party. Remember, if you talk to him, it’s a surprise.” The message terminated.

“This came in about three weeks ago. I never got back to her.”

“Geordi, the probe has entered the planet’s atmosphere and I’m ready to take it onto the ship. If you would like to take a couple of days off, I’ll run the interface,” Riker offered.

“The interface is calibrated specifically to my visor’s inputs. It would take you at least ten hours to convert it, and that crew down there can’t wait.”

“The interface doesn’t have to be fully compatible. I could run it right now. I wouldn’t have the same control that you have, but it would still work.”

Annoyed, Geordi rose from his chair and declared, “Forget it. I’m the best person for the job, and there’s no reason why we shouldn’t proceed as planned.”

“The Hera is reason enough.”

“The Hera is missing, that’s all,” Geordi said defiantly. “Now until I hear something different, my mother might just as well have taken the crew on an unscheduled holiday. Let’s go.”



Stardate 47215.6 (Friday 20/03/2370, 16:55) — Deck Twenty-Five
— Cybernetics Lab A

Data finished hooking up the interface suit with Geordi inside as Picard’s voice came over the comm. “*Picard to Commander Data, report.*”

Data replied, “We are ready to bring the interface online, sir.

“*The probe is in position aboard the Raman. Proceed.*”

“Activating the remote sensors. Initiating interface now,” Data said as he tapped the adjacent console.

Crusher stood once again at the medical console across the room. “Vital signs normal. Geordi, how do you feel?”

“Fine,” he confirmed.

“Do you have visual contact?” Data asked.

“Not yet.” Geordi’s virtual self began to feel elsewhere, but everything was hazy. “Data, turn up the input sensors. I’m not seeing anything.”

“Acknowledged,” Data replied.

A moment later, Geordi could better make out the shape of a corridor. “Okay I can see, but no colours.”

“Increasing signal strength to seventy-five percent of tolerance.”

“Ah, that’s better,” Geordi said as he began to finally feel as if he was really in the probe’s location aboard the Raman.

“Your pulse has gone up,” Crusher noted. “Your nervous system probably has to get used to the input levels.”

“I’m excited, that’s all, Doctor. This is like being on a roller coaster.” Geordi laughed. “Or a first date. I’m all right.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Crusher warned. “If your heart rate gets too high, we’re going to disconnect you.”

“Understood. It’s a mess in here. There must be a breach in the hull someplace,” Geordi noted as he started to move down the corridor via the probe. “I’m picking up atmospheric gasses in the corridor. Methane and ammonia, primarily.”

He took several sensor readings, which he experienced as reaching out and touching the detritus in the corridor. “That break in the hull might even be on the bridge itself. I’m heading towards the bridge.” But he paused a moment later when he saw an eerily familiar shape protruding from a fallen piece of the corridor. “I’ve found someone.”

Data asked, “What is your position?”

“About twelve metres up the main corridor. He’s trapped under some conduit from the bulkhead. I can’t move it.” He knelt and tried to pick up the large pipe that pinned the crewman to the ground, genuinely feeling as if he was there doing it in person but reminding himself that he wasn’t. “I’m going to need more power to the tractor beam.”

“Go to eighty percent of tolerance, Data, no higher,” Crusher ordered.

Geordi experienced the increase as a sudden surge of strength and was able to lift the conduit up and toss it to the side. Again he used the sensors in a way that felt as natural as his own touch to check the man's pulse. "He's dead," Geordi declared. "Data, that door at the end of this corridor: what's it lead to?"

"A magnetic storage bay."

"If there was a break in the bridge, that'd be the safest place to go." Geordi attempted to open the door, but the control panel was inoperative and the door itself would not budge. "Data, give me a phaser burst: narrow focus, level four intensity." He held up his hand and a beam shot out from his palm, once again reminiscent of the super powers his sister used to describe to him out of the comic books.

The burst succeeded in activating the panel and opening the door. Inside, he could immediately see bodies strewn around the room. "I've found them," he reported. He picked one to check for a pulse, but already knew what he'd find. "They're dead, all of them," he said, knowing he should check each one just in case.

But before he could begin that grim task, he detected heat from behind. He turned to find an inexplicable inferno. "There's a fire in here," he began, but before he could report further the flames lurched towards him. Instinctively, he lifted his hands to shield himself and screamed at the resulting searing agony.

Crusher shouted, "Data, disconnect!" and ran up to Geordi on the platform. "What happened? Geordi?"

Shaking, confused, and in pain, he replied, "I don't know. My hands," he said as he held them forward and she gently took his wrists to turn his palms up.

Astonished, Crusher said, "They're burned!"



Stardate 47215.7 (Friday 20/03/2370, 17:30) — Sickbay

Picard and Crusher stood over the seated La Forge — who was still in the interface suit — all of them peering into the burn chamber on the table where the engineer’s hands were being treated.

“How did this happen?” Picard asked.

Crusher replied, “There was some kind of energy discharge in the interface suit.”

“But shouldn’t the safety overrides have prevented that?”

“Yes, but I have a theory why they didn’t. The tolerance levels of the interface were set extremely high. I think Geordi’s neural response to the input was so strong that it created a feedback loop.”

Geordi theorised, “The sensors that were transmitting the sensation of heat to my hands must’ve overloaded.”

Picard frowned in concern. “The crew of the Raman are dead. I would like to retrieve them and their vessel, but not if it means putting your safety at risk.”

“If we turn down the sensory input on the probe, I should be fine,” Geordi protested. “Seven people lost their lives down there, Captain. We should at least retrieve the information they were collecting.”

Picard turned to Crusher for her opinion. “Doctor?”

She reluctantly replied, “If we operate the interface at lower input levels, I’d say the risk is acceptable.”

Picard tapped his combadge. “Picard to Riker.”

“Riker here.”

“We will proceed with the probe.”

“We’ll have to take it into the Raman’s auxiliary control room. Their bridge is too badly damaged.”

“How long before you have it in position?”

“A couple of hours. We have to cut through the bulkhead.”

“Acknowledged,” Picard said, nodding at Crusher before heading out.

Crusher smiled warmly at Geordi. “Well, it looks like you’ll have time to recuperate.”

“Yeah,” he said with a sigh. “There’s something I’ve got to do anyway.”



Stardate 47215.7 (Friday 20/03/2370, 17:50) — Main Engineering

Main engineering bustled with activity as everyone prepared for the new drive installation. Aisling enjoyed watching Anna bouncing around with the same giddy air she’d had all week since her triumph in the all-hands meeting. Dean, on the other hand, had been consistently selecting tasks that kept him out of circulation and everybody seemed happy with that arrangement.

Anna caught Aisling watching more than once and grinned each time. *She’s proud of herself*, Aisling noted. *I wonder if it’s the first time? If she moved those braids up like pigtails she’d look just like Aoife skipping out of school after a good day.*

As if she’d overheard the thought, Anna skip-limped over to Aisling at the central console and held out a PADD the same way little Aoife held forth schoolwork with a reward sticker upon it. “I streamlined all of these security-related procedures so you can reduce your team’s time spent on each.”

Aisling raised an eyebrow, took the PADD, glanced it over, and then said, “Yes you did.”

A cloud of doubt crossed over Anna’s face. “Is it okay? Geordi had it on a list of things I could do to help if I had time, and I had time.”

Aisling smiled warmly. “It’s perfectly okay. I do need to check it against protocol, though.”

Anna immediately cheered back up. “I know. That’s why I gave it to you. I don’t have the clearance for that. Technically.”

“Technically?”

Anna shrugged impishly. “I know what all the security protocols pertaining the drive are and what they do and how to

alter them or enhance them but I'm not supposed to know so we'll keep on pretending that I don't."

Aisling chuckled. "Yeah, we'd better —"

"Attention everyone!" came Sorenson's resounding voice from the entryway to the drive area so suddenly that Anna yelped and ducked under the console, only rising enough to peek out as he continued, "I have an important announcement and I need everyone's attention, please."

Anna rose back to full height slowly as the engineering crew gathered around. She looked to Aisling nervously and stepped closer towards her as others filled the area around the central console.

"Don't be scared," Aisling whispered to her. "It's not a red alert so we're not in danger."

Anna nodded, but Aisling saw she was back to her pre-speech nervous posture, her hands once again twisting together before her.

"It's my sad duty to pass on the news that the Hera is missing and presumed lost. If any of you had friends or family serving on that ship and you need time off, I've been instructed by senior staff to ensure you feel free to take that time," David said very formally. More sadly he added, "And in case you didn't know, Commander La Forge's mother is...was the captain of the Hera."

A wave of murmurs swept over those gathered.

He continued, "I think we all know that the best way to support our chief engineer right now is to get all of our work done efficiently without any unnecessary issues that might pile up on him. You have your schedules. Let's all buckle down and get to it, but if you need help with anything, go to your team leader or you're welcome to go directly to Counselor Troi. Thank you, everyone. I apologise for the disruption."

The entire atmosphere of the room had changed, replacing the buzz with a general sense of unease, but they dispersed and went back to their previous tasks.

Anna, however, remained very close to Aisling's side. She softly asked, "That's sad, right?"

Aisling found the question confusing. “Yes, of course it is.”

Anna stared down at the console. “I mean...he liked his mom?”

Aisling almost asked her what the hell kind of question that was, but then paused to note Anna’s completely baffled expression. *Shit, it’s the kind of question someone who grew up as an abandoned orphan asks*, she thought. She gently replied, “Yeah, Anna, I’m pretty sure Geordi and his mother loved each other very much.”

Anna nodded, said, “Oh,” but kept staring at her reflection in the console in clear bewilderment.

Aisling felt a sudden desire to wrap Anna up in soft blankets, feed her soup, and read her bedtime stories. The news about Geordi’s mother was hard enough, but watching Anna grapple with it was heartbreaking.

Anna tentatively looked up at Aisling. “So...is it usual for people to still love their parents that much even when they’re grown up?”

Oh honey, she thought, but she nodded and said, “Mmhm. It’s the way it ought to be for everyone, to have generations before and after you all full of love and belonging.”

Anna’s mouth twisted to the side as if she was frustrated at her inability to comprehend. She said simply, “Hm.”

Aisling barely resisted the urge to pull her into a hug, and only did because she didn’t want unexpected physical touch to trigger any of Anna’s other issues.

Anna shrugged and asked, “So...what do we do? I mean obviously work in here but...personally? Or is personal help just for family with stuff like this?”

Oh hell, she’s so lost and lonely and still her first instinct is to help someone else if she can. She carefully explained, “Personal help can be from anyone who cares about the grieving person. You just support them in whatever way they need. It’s different for everyone. For now, just stick to what David said. If an opportunity comes up to do more and it feels right, then go with it.”

Anna nodded, appearing to be relieved to have a playbook at hand. “Okay. I just don’t want to say the wrong thing.”

“Just be your usual sweet self. And if you ever need to talk about your own family —“

Anna’s whole body cringed and she took a defensive step back. “No thank you,” she said, a little too quickly, a little too firmly, and Aisling knew better than to push.

Anna returned to her usual console overlooking the drive, tense and skittish once again. Aisling sighed, pinched the top of her nose at her forehead to stave off a stress headache, and then got back to her own work with a fresh sense of depressing helplessness for those whose suffering was well beyond her ability to fix.



Stardate 47215.8 (Friday 20/03/2370, 18:15) — La Forge’s Quarters

Geordi was once again slumped in front of his desk terminal in his quarters, this time in a subspace conversation with his father who sat in his exozoology laboratory nearly half the quadrant away.

“How are you, Dad?” Geordi asked.

“As well as expected, under the circumstances. Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Geordi replied unconvincingly.

“I spoke with your sister this morning. She said she’ll be in touch with you in a few days. Right now, she’s pretty upset.” There was an uncomfortable pause, and then Doctor La Forge continued, *“The service for the Hera will probably be on Vulcan. Most of the crew was from there. But your sister and I want to have a private ceremony.”*

“Dad,” Geordi said, leaning closer to the terminal. “Don’t you think everybody’s jumping the gun here? Last I heard there were

still two starships out there looking for them. They've found no debris, no residual warp distortion."

"And no ship."

"Not yet, but that doesn't mean they won't."

"Starfleet is considering the Hera lost. The search isn't much more than a formality at this point. Geordi, your mother's gone."

"Yeah, well you can think that if you want," Geordi grumbled. "But until I see some hard evidence, I'm not going to give up hope."

His father looked away for a moment, and then conceded, *"All right, Geordi. Call me if you need anything."*

With the call terminated, Geordi tapped off the screen in frustration and walked out of the room.



Stardate 47215.8 (Friday 20/03/2370, 18:23) — Data's Quarters

Data sat at his own desk, looking at his own terminal intently even though the screen appeared to be blank. He leaned in closer, an expression of deep concentration upon his face. When the doorbell chimed, he did not cease his careful watch on the screen but merely said, "Come in."

Geordi entered and walked over to Data's desk. "Hey Data," he said in a melancholy tone. "Still working?"

Data's eyes remained firmly fixed on his screen as he replied, "No. I have completed the adjustments on the interface. I am now waiting for Commander Riker to finish moving the probe." But then one of his social interaction scripts kicked in, so finally he turned his eyes up towards his friend to ask, "Do you need to be comforted?"

"No," Geordi said, slightly defensively but not so much that Data could catch the intonation. "I was just passing by. I was wondering what you were up to."

Data took that information at face value, given that Geordi's quarters were two doors down to port, meaning they often passed each other's quarters on their way to turbolifts or the stairs up to the ramps that led to the bridge. Thus, he looked back to the screen and responded, "I am using the time to catch up on my study of poetry."

Geordi came around Data's desk to read the poetry over his shoulder. "Data, there's nothing on the screen."

"That is not entirely correct," Data replied, anticipating the satisfaction of sharing this information with his friend. "While it is true the display is currently blank, this emptiness has a poetic meaning. Therefore it cannot be considered 'nothing' as such."

"Says who?" Geordi asked skeptically.

"The ancient Doosodarians," Data keenly explained. "Much of their poetry contained such 'lacunae' or empty spaces. Often these pauses measured several days in length, during which poet and audience were encouraged to fully acknowledge the emptiness of the experience." Data had grown accustomed to Anna's eager willingness to listen to him on various topics of interest, so he hoped Geordi would also share his enthusiasm.

But Geordi did not seem impressed at all. He muttered, "I remember a few lectures from Starfleet Academy that seemed like that."

This unexpected result prompted Data to re-evaluate the entire conversation and once again initiate his scripts pertaining to human communication about grief. "Are you certain you do not wish to talk about your mother?"

"Why would you say that?"

Data readily laid out his reasoning. "You are no doubt feeling emotional distress as a result of her disappearance. While you claim to be 'just passing by', that is most likely an excuse to start a conversation about this uncomfortable subject. Am I correct?"

"No, Data. Sometimes 'just passing by' means, 'just passing by'."

“Hm,” Data said as he considered Geordi’s words, decided his re-evaluation was in error, and that his other calculations were correct after all. “Then I apologise for my premature assumption.” He then returned to his previous conversational topic, assuming Geordi wished to as well. “This particular poem has a lacuna of forty-seven minutes. You may experience the emptiness with me if you wish.”

Geordi shrugged, said, “Thanks,” and moved to stand behind Data whereupon they both stared at the empty screen.

But a moment later Geordi sighed and said, “You know, Data, maybe you gave up a little too easily.”

Data blinked in confusion. “I do not understand.”

“Well, when I said ‘just passing by’ means ‘just passing by’, I really didn’t mean it.”

Data came to realise this was one of those complicated conversations where a heavy emotional toll made it difficult for a human to be clear in their communication, instead relying on poorly-defined nuance and inexplicably linked contradictions to stumble through their organic neurological turmoil. He therefore returned yet again to his grief-conversation script set and said, “My initial assumption was correct. You do wish to speak of your mother.”

Geordi sat on the edge of Data’s desk, which Data noted as strange since it did not appear to be comfortable, yet was a favoured location for Spot as well.

“Am I crazy to think that she’s still alive?” Geordi asked.

“Your sanity is not in question,” Data replied, hoping the words would be comforting. But since he was unable to mislead his friend, he was compelled to add, “However, your evaluation of the available information is biased.”

“She’s a starship captain,” Geordi argued. “She’s gotten herself into and out of impossible situations before. Why should this be any different?”

Data answered truthfully. “Disappearances fitting the profile of the Hera have rarely ended with the safe recovery of ship and crew.”

“Well that makes me feel much better!” Geordi retorted, standing up.

Data turned away, uncertain what Geordi wished from him. His programming indicated that these conversations were often very difficult, and therefore could not be readily scripted towards satisfactory conclusions.

Geordi sighed. “Look, I’m sorry, Data. I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“I am not offended,” Data replied honestly, though he did wish he had more effective answers that would help his friend. “You are upset. Your reactions are not surprising,” he said in an attempt to demonstrate a semblance of emotional understanding.

“It’s just that...if she really is dead, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Data began to calculate his next best response, evaluating various bits of friendly advice, suggestions of distracting activities, or even offering a hug. However, before he could decide on an action, Geordi sighed again and left the room.

Data stared after him for a few seconds, decided Geordi likely did not wish to be followed, and then resumed his poetic experience, anticipating that he would check on Geordi later when they were ready to proceed with the probe.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Stardate 47215.9 (Friday 20/03/2370, 19:45) — Deck Twenty-Five
— Cybernetics Lab A

Crusher reported from her station, “We’re receiving the probe’s telemetry.”

Data confirmed, “The input levels are currently at fifty-three percent of tolerance.”

“That’s too low, Data. I won’t be able to do anything down there,” La Forge complained.

Crusher firmly replied, “I want to start with as wide a margin of safety as possible. We can adjust upward later. Ready?”

“Go ahead,” Geordi conceded.

“Initiating interface,” Data said.

“I can’t see anything.”

“I am increasing the input now.”

Gradually, images of the Raman’s auxiliary control room appeared before Geordi’s vision. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s better, but I need more.”

“Is this level sufficient?” Data asked.

But Geordi was unexpectedly distracted at seeing a living person standing across the room. He peered through the haze of the increasing visual field, uncertain if he could believe what he thought he was seeing.

“Geordi?” Data asked.

Geordi moved the probe further into the room to get closer to the person who appeared to be waiting for him there.

“Geordi, do you hear me?” Data asked.

Geordi wondered if he was losing his mind, but he could no longer deny what he was seeing. His stomach in knots, he asked tentatively, “Mom? Mom, is it you?”

The person in front of him who looked exactly like Captain La Forge replied, “Is it you?”

Geordi looked down at his own body, or rather, that of the probe. “Oh, I forgot. All you can see is this probe. Yes, it’s me!” he said joyfully. “I’m actually on the Enterprise. I’m interfaced with this probe.”

Crusher asked, “Geordi, who are you speaking to? What are you seeing?”

Geordi ignored her and instead asked the person before him, “But is it really you?”

“Yes, Geordi. It’s Mom,” she replied.

Geordi could barely resist a boyish urge to run over and cling to her as he had when he was little and frightened that she might go out of hearing range. Something in him still reminded him that this wasn’t possible, and yet there she was. “But how can that be?” he asked. “I mean, how is it possible?”

“There’s no time to explain. We have to go down,” his mother said, walking to the other side of the Raman’s auxiliary control console.

“Down where?”

“The surface,” she said in a tone that he knew meant the matter was not up for debate.

But back in the laboratory, Crusher used the exact same tone to demand, “Geordi, report.”

Given the choice of dominant maternal figures above his rank, Geordi knew which one he needed to answer most. “Hang on, Doctor,” he said, and then addressed his mother again. “Why? Why do we have to go down to the surface?”

“We’re dying,” Captain La Forge replied.

“We? The Hera? You mean the Hera is down there?”

Crusher said, “We’re disconnecting you right now.”

“No, wait!” Geordi protested.

“We need your help. I need your help,” his mother said.

“Mom,” Geordi said, unable to resist approaching her any longer. She said his name just as he reached out and touched her

shoulders. There was an electrical discharge, and Geordi fell unconscious, his body held up by the interface suit's supports back in the lab.

Data and Crusher rushed to him. Data reported, "The cut off has been automatically activated," and began to disconnect the suit.

Crusher quickly assessed him with her tricorder. "He's in neural shock. We need to get him to sickbay."



Stardate 47216.0 (Friday 20/03/2370, 20:10) — Sickbay

Geordi had regained consciousness as Data carried him into sickbay, protesting as he was put on a biobed and examined that he had to re-establish the connection with his mother. Data and Picard stood patiently by as Geordi detailed the encounter, with Crusher and Ogawa running myriad tests over him all the while.

When her tests were concluded, Crusher declared, "The sensory overload didn't cause any permanent damage, but I wouldn't want to expose his brain to that kind of stimulus again."

"Is there any indication what caused this hallucination?" Picard asked.

"His brain functions are normal."

"I told you, I wasn't hallucinating," La Forge said defensively.

Crusher gave him a disapproving look but didn't argue further. Data gently said, "Geordi, I have analysed the probe's sensor logs. There are no records to indicate the presence of a living human on board the Raman."

Geordi explained, "Well she wasn't exactly there. Her ship is down on the surface."

"So you believe that what you saw was some kind of transmission?" Picard asked.

Geordi nodded. “Somehow she has managed to communicate with me.”

“We have no indication of a transmission of any kind,” Data said.

“Maybe I’m the only one who can detect it because I’m interfaced with the probe.”

Data’s brow furrowed in contemplation. He looked to Picard and said, “The probe does allow Geordi to sense quantum fluctuations, subspace anomalies, and other phenomenon not perceptible by any other kind of sensors.”

“Granted,” Picard replied, “but how could he perceive his mother visually as if she were standing there in the room?”

“I’m not sure, but I do know that our brains weren’t designed to process the kind of sensory information Geordi was getting,” Crusher said. “When the brain receives something it doesn’t understand, it interprets the input as best it can — sometimes as a smell or a sound, sometimes visually.”

“You see?” Geordi said defensively to Picard.

Crusher carefully continued, “But Geordi, I’m not saying that your mother was really communicating with you. I’m just trying to give you a reason why you might’ve thought that she was.”

“Look, I’m telling you my mother’s ship is trapped down there and we’ve got to help them.”

“Geordi, the Hera’s last reported position was three hundred light years away. How could it end up here?” Picard asked.

“If the Hera is on the surface, its hull could not possibly withstand the pressure of the atmosphere,” Data added.

Geordi insisted, “Well at least let me go back down there just to be sure.”

Crusher quite firmly said, “I do not recommend that he use the interface again. The sensory overload almost killed you.”

“I’ll be all right!”

Picard put his proverbial foot down on Geordi’s protests. “No, no, I’m sorry, Geordi. I’m not prepared to risk your life. Data, find

another way of salvaging the Raman. I want an alternate plan in two hours.”

Data nodded and left.

“Geordi, I’d like you to talk to Counselor Troi,” Picard said.

Geordi sighed loudly.

Picard was unyielding in his command. “She’s expecting you.” Then he turned and left as well, giving the engineer no space to argue the directive.



Stardate 47216.0 (Friday 20/03/2370, 20:20) — Troi’s Office

Troi knew from the moment that La Forge entered, this was not going to be a friendly session. However, her current role was only partially to give him support for grieving; the Captain had made it clear that she was to evaluate Geordi’s mental state for official duty purposes.

She watched him pace around the room for a moment, and then asked, “What’s your mother like, Geordi?”

“If you think I’m going to start talking about my childhood, Counselor, you’re way off.”

“That’s not what I asked,” she replied, unwilling to let him get away with his attempt at brushing her off.

Geordi paced some more, sighed, and relented. “Well, she’s...” he began, still wandering and idly poking at the room’s decor. “She’s brilliant. Funny. She’s incredibly perceptive. She knows people — knows what they’re all about even before they open their mouths. She’s always been that way. She’s...she’s a real good judge of character.”

Deanna felt his anger giving way to a frustrated sort of melancholy, tinged with guilt. “When was the last time you saw her?”

“About seven months ago, when she first took command of the Hera. I went to a party she had for her crew. She wanted me to come over and see her, but I was really busy at the time,” he said, his defensiveness and guilt spurring each other on. “I mean I suppose I could have made the time to go and see her, but...you know...I just didn’t think that...” He held out his hands plaintively. “I mean, you know, I, I didn’t think that...” His words faltered as his jaw clenched.

She threw him a lifeline. “You didn’t think it would be your last chance to see her.”

“That’s not what I was going to say,” he muttered, running his fingers over the back of the couch.

“I want to suggest something. Call it a theory, all right?”

Much calmer, but still with a hint of defiance, he shrugged widely and said, “All right.”

“You’re worried about the disappearance of your mother and feeling guilty that you didn’t see her when you had the chance, so you’re unwilling to consider that she might be dead. Your need to believe she’s alive is so strong that it manifests itself as a physical image.”

Freshly annoyed, he retorted, “But she told me she’s trapped on that planet, that she’s in danger. Now, if this was some kind of wish fulfilment, don’t you think I’d be fantasising her safe and sound?”

She gently responded, “No. Because that would be the end of your fantasy. You’d know it wasn’t true. The more involved and complicated and unending your story is, the longer you can believe your mother’s still alive.”

Geordi shook his head and grumbled, “Yeah, well, that’s your theory, Counselor. I’ve got one of my own.” With that, he strode out of her office.

She turned to her terminal to make an official note that while La Forge was still fit for duty, increased therapeutic support would be required.



Anna sat at her freshly tidied table, fiddling with a pleasingly twirly sensor component and wondering what her next casual project should be, when the doorbell sounded. “Come in,” she said.

Data entered. She smiled at him, but it quickly faded as she asked, “How’s Geordi?”

“I am not entirely certain.”

“Oh.”

“I do wish to speak to you on a related personal topic, but first I wish to ask for your opinion on a technological problem.”

“Sure thing. I’ll help in any way I can,” she said as she used her left leg to push a chair out for him.

“Thank you,” he said as he sat down. “I anticipated you would be willing to help.” He summarised the technical issues of trying to rescue the remains of the Raman, but omitted any mention of Geordi’s visions of his mother.

Anna blew out a long, slow breath, her eyes wide as she contemplated the puzzle. “That’s a toughie. But it’s nice that someone’s trying to rescue the ship even though they’re all...” she shuddered, and then crossed her arms tightly.

“It is Starfleet policy to do so.”

Anna raised an eyebrow at him.

“I realise why you are skeptical, but the situation with the Baltimore involved particularly unusual —“

“Unusual circumstances, believe me, I know. I’ve heard it a zillion times,” she grumbled. Then she sighed and said, “Anyway we’ve got other unusual circumstances now.” Her brow furrowed in thought. “I suppose the tractor beam isn’t useful or otherwise you’d just do that?”

“The atmospheric interference is inhibiting the beam’s ability to lock onto the Raman.”

“Right. Beef it up, maybe?”

“Even at maximum, the penetration is insufficient relative to the density of the atmospheric gases.”

“What about using the beam to nudge the ship?”

Data pondered this suggestion. “Hm. An intriguing concept, but with the tumultuous forces at work we’d risk breaking the Raman apart.”

“Yeah, or pushing it down further. You need more beams.”

They both then said in unison, “The shuttlecraft have tractor beams.”

But then Data added, “However, they are relatively weak compared to our main tractor beam and I do not believe they would add sufficient power, even in combination.”

“Probably not,” Anna agreed. She uncrossed her arms and leaned towards him, elbows on the table and chin in her hands. “But what if you used the shuttlecraft shields as mirrors to intensify their tractor beams? I’ve done that before.” She grinned awkwardly. “Kind of by accident, while blending the Baltimore’s shields with the shuttlecraft and testing that shuttle’s tractor. Good thing it was pointed at the empty sky, heh.”

Data’s brows went up. “That is an interesting possibility.”

“If you use a couple of Type 15s, I already have an idea of the shield calibrations. I could whip up a simulation down in engineering and send the results to you, if that’d help.”

“Yes please,” Data said.

“You said you had a personal thing to talk about too?”

“Yes. I have a...potentially sensitive question I would like to ask.”

“Sensitive for you or for me?”

“Potentially both,” he admitted. “I am very uncertain about something pertaining to human communication and emotional preferences.

“I’m probably not the best person to ask about human stuff. I get it wrong a lot.”

“On the contrary, I specifically wish to ask you because it is your particular preferences I wish to ascertain.”

“Oh, okay. Go ahead.”

“Thank you. Every time I have observed you becoming upset, frightened, or overwhelmed and you return to your quarters, you have said you wish to be left alone. However, each time I have also been uncertain if that expressed desire is accurate — if perhaps you actually wish for continued support but do not believe you are allowed request it, or do not believe it will be granted, neither of which is the case. I am eager to give you support. I have recently been made aware by another friend that perhaps I ‘give up too easily’ when told support is not needed, which has caused me reflect on the times when I have considered more assertively offering you support but chose not to because you have said you wish to be alone. So my question to you is this: when you say you wish to be alone, am I to take that literally or are you waiting for me to...push further?”

Anna’s brow furrowed again. “Oh. I see.”

“If this is too uncomfortable —“

“No, no...it’s a good question. I...hm.” She leaned her cheek against her left hand and reached around with her right to pick at one of her coiled braids. “I’m trying to ask myself and be honest in my own head first.” She continued unravelling her hair for a moment, blinked rapidly several times, and then said, “The part where you say I’m not asking because I don’t believe I’ll get what I need, that’s pretty true.” She quickly clarified, “I’m learning that it’s not true, that you are actually keen to help and you probably don’t mind being asked.”

“I am indeed ‘keen to help’, and I do not mind being asked.”

“Yeah,” she said, shifting in her chair and reaching up with her left hand to pick at the coiled braid on that side. “It’s hard, though. It’s...hm.”

“You are unused to this opportunity.”

With visible relief, she put both hands on the table and said, “Yes, exactly. And...um...” In a flash, the relief gave way to a scowl. Her hands dropped to her lap and began twisting together. She turned her head to the floor beside her and said softly, “The

first time I thought a man was going to answer my call for help, he...”

Data eliminated the need for her to relive the unpleasant memory by interjecting, “I understand. I am very sorry that happened to you.”

Anna nodded, sighed again, shuddered again, and then looked at him in desperation. “But I know you’re not like that. I know you’d never...” She grunted, appeared nauseated for a moment, but then waved her hand in the air as if she was swiping away a display on a large screen, sighed more resolutely, and then firmly said, “I’m not afraid of you. I am worried about being a burden, even if you say I’m not. It’s hard for me to just accept help, much less ask for it, in part because I don’t know what help I want. But when I run away and say I need to be alone it’s because...” She rolled her eyes at herself, crossed her arms again, and sheepishly admitted, “When I’m too scared or too overwhelmed I...” She hesitated, then whispered, “I throw up.”

“You experience physical illness along with your emotional distress”

Anna nodded.

“That must be very unpleasant for you.”

“Yeah, and embarrassing. I don’t want anybody around when that happens. Even if they’re being nice. It’d make it worse.”

“I have observed that humans have significant privacy requirements when it comes to biological functions.”

“Yes, but this is worse than, like, just peeing or something. If I’m throwing up because of social stuff, it’s like...” she trailed off, struggling to explain it.

“Continued social interaction exacerbates the problem,” Data surmised.

“Yes, exactly. Feeling embarrassed for throwing up and feeling like I’d have to apologise for it and stop doing it to make the other person comfortable makes it all worse and worse and worse.”

“I understand, and I would never wish to make a situation like that worse for you by my presence. However, perhaps it would be

useful for you to know that I am incapable of experiencing physical revulsion or emotional judgement of that sort of biological reaction. Unlike most others, I could potentially be of assistance without the need to worry about my reaction.”

Anna shrugged awkwardly. “I would probably still feel like I had to try, though.”

Data nodded. “I understand that as well.”

“I suppose there are other times, though, where I’ve run here to hide away when actually...maybe...I don’t know, maybe having you around would be nice. Not when I’m throwing up, more like when I feel like...” She waved her hands wildly around her head in a gesture of chaos.

“Confused? Uncertain? Bewildered? Perplexed? Doubtful? Anxious?”

“Yes, all of that, all mingling and overlapping and I can’t unpack it all. Too much rapid input, like mashing your palms on a console.”

“Ah, yes. In those circumstances, you would prefer someone to talk to?”

“Not just anyone, and maybe not even to talk,” she replied, twisting her fingers again. “But there have been a couple of times when I felt like that where...I wished you were nearby. Sometimes just having you around makes it easier for me to calm down and think things out.”

“I would be very honoured to provide that support for you. Would you find it useful if I more assertively offered that?”

“Maybe. But only if you’re not busy. That’s a big part of it, worrying that I’d be wasting your time.”

“Hm. Perhaps it would be useful for you to know that I view my lifetime as being directed towards having meaningful experiences, and while I have pledged to dedicate much of that time towards my duties to Starfleet, it is also very important to me to seek out personal experiences. Supporting a friend is a very meaningful experience to me, and I am actively seeking opportunities to perform that function.”

Anna smiled a little. “You really are the most generous person I’ve ever met, Data. I guess...maybe I’ll try to be better about asking for your company when I’m upset but not throwing up.”

“I will make an effort to remind you frequently that I am available.”

“And how about if I promise you here and now that if I say I need to be alone, I mean I’m going to be sick and I don’t want an audience for it?”

“I have just created an automatic translation subroutine to that effect.”

Anna laughed a little.

“When that happens, would you like me to check on you a short time after?”

Her smile disappeared as she contemplated this new offer. “Oh. Um....gosh. Um...” Her eyes darted back and forth as she thought it out. “I think maybe...yes? I would like you to come and be kind to me after it’s...done with. But only if you are available, like really available. I can’t want it if I think there’s even a chance that you’ll do it when you’re supposed to be on duty or something.”

“Understood. My duty shifts as second officer are more flexible than most of the crew, especially since I do not sleep and therefore often take on more than would be required of a human. Would it help if I promise to not abandon a direct duty such as a bridge shift or other active work, so you may always be assured that if I have come to support you, it is not at the expense of what you may perceive to be an important task?”

Her smile returned. “Yes, that’s a good promise.”

“Thank you.”

She laughed softly again. “I should be thanking you.”

“We may thank each other, because we are assisting each other with matching needs.”

Anna put her hands over her heart. “Oh, that’s a lovely way to put it. That helps too.”

“Is there any way I can support you at the moment?”

Her smile intensified. “No, thank you, I’m actually okay right now.”

Data stood. “Then I look forward to the next time you require support.”

They furrowed their brows at each other, and then Anna burst into a loud laugh.

“I did not mean that to sound as if —“

“I know, Data, I know. That’s why it’s funny.”

“Ah, yes.” He went to the door, then turned back to look at her. “Would you like to hear a joke before I return to researching the rescue of the Raman?”

“I have no idea if it’s okay to say yes to that or not with such awful things going on, but...yes, I would love to hear a joke.”

Data said, “Knock knock.”

Anna laughed and replied, “Who’s there?”

“Tank.”

She giggled and snorted, fully predicting the answer but eager to play along. “Tank who?”

“You are very welcome.”

Her hands went over heart again as she beamed brightly at him.

Data nodded, smiled back at her in return, and left.



Stardate 47216.2 (Friday 20/03/2370, 22:20) — Observation Lounge

Picard, Riker, Data, and La Forge gathered in the observation lounge to determine their next options.

As they took their seats, Data reported, “I have consulted with others to explore the possibility of using a tractor beam to pull the Raman from the atmosphere. However, the high level of interference prevents a positive lock.”

“If we set up some sort of relay system?” Riker suggested.
“That is the conclusion we reached as well, Commander. Two shuttlecraft, staggered between the Enterprise and the Raman, with their shields adjusted to refocus the tractor beam. Specialist White is in engineering now calculating the shield parameters, and Lieutenant Hale and his team stand ready to execute the procedure.”

Picard skilfully hid his reaction to White’s name. “Can we get the shuttles close enough without danger? Mr. La Forge?”

La Forge contemplated it for a moment and then answered, “Sure...um...yeah. As long as we keep them both above the troposphere, that’ll be all right.”

“Then in that case —” Picard began.

La Forge cut him off. “But what about the Hera? We’d be leaving my mother and her crew stranded on the planet.”

“Commander —” Picard attempted again.

But La Forge was not about to let it go. “I’ve been thinking about this. A couple of weeks ago I got a message from my mother. She said she had a new chief engineer who had been experimenting with the warp drive. Now, I’ve seen the Hera: it uses trionic initiators in the warp coil. They have a reputation of strange side effects, especially when you start playing around with them.”

Data’s brow furrowed. “There have been reports of warp bubbles and other subspace deformations,” he confirmed.

“So, what if that’s what happened?” La Forge said, pointing at Data. “Not a warp bubble, but a subspace funnel?” he theorised as he stood and moved around the end of the table.

“Connecting two points through subspace?” Riker asked.

“Well the Hera could have accidentally created a distortion that emptied out right here at Marijne Seven.”

“Why here?” Picard asked.

“The Hera passed near this planet just ten days ago. There’s an awful lot of subspace disturbance in the atmosphere. The ship could’ve accidentally picked up some residual traces that directed

the funnel right back here,” La Forge said, pointing out the window.

Data folded his hands on the table and looked down at them.

“So the Hera’s in one piece somewhere out there?” Riker asked.

“Maybe it’s being surrounded by some kind of warp field, but who knows for how long?” La Forge said.

“Mr. La Forge, do you have any evidence to support this hypothesis?” Picard asked.

“I did pick up some pretty strange subspace readings when I was interfaced with the probe.”

“Geordi, that could have been anything,” Riker said tersely.

“Yeah, but I talked to her, Commander,” Geordi replied, his tone becoming more desperate and defensive. “She asked me to bring the Raman closer to the planet.”

Picard pressed his lips together and made the slightest nod, knowing where this was going and unwilling to indulge it much further without cause. “Mr. Data, is any of this possible?”

Data glanced at Geordi in a manner that could very nearly be described as uncomfortable. He then carefully replied to Picard, “Yes, sir. However, it is highly unlikely.”

“How unlikely?”

Once again Data glanced at his friend. “Nearly impossible, sir.”

Picard nodded again, more firmly this time, and put a declarative fist on the table, albeit gently. “Let’s proceed with the shuttle plan.”

“Captain —” La Forge began.

But this time Picard cut him off with a firm, “Dismissed.”

Riker and Data quickly left the room to the starboard side. La Forge headed towards the same door, but not before whipping his chair around roughly enough that it spun and bumped into Picard’s.

“Mr. La Forge,” Picard said, rising and adjusting his uniform.

La Forge stopped and slowly turned to him, shoulders slumped.

Picard approached. “I want you to know that I am not unsympathetic to what you’re going through. Your mother’s

disappearance is tragic, but I cannot risk your safety on the basis of a dubious hypothesis.”

“Captain, if I’m right and there’s just one chance in a million that she’s alive —“

“I’m sorry, Geordi. My decision is made.”

“I understand, sir.”

Picard exited to the starboard as well, leaving Geordi to stand in the lounge sighing on his own.



Stardate 47216.2 (Friday 20/03/2370, 22:30) — Main Engineering

Geordi moped his way down into main engineering, despairing as to what he could possibly do or say next, feeling the chance to save his mother slipping through his fingers. He went to the chief engineer’s station without a word to anyone and plopped into his chair, slumping there and idly poking at the information awaiting him on the console.

Anna was seated at the opposite console, busily tapping away. She glanced at him when he came in, but then turned back to her screen in awkward silence. A few minutes later she timidly said, “I think I’ve got everything set up for Data and Hale’s shuttlecraft team. You want to check it first?”

Geordi shook his head. He was sulking and he knew it, and he knew it wasn’t fair to Anna who was only trying to help. He pulled himself into a more upright position and replied, “Copy it to my console as you send it up, but I trust you to get it right.”

“Okay. Happy to help any way I can.”

As he tried to figure out what to say to her, he noticed movement in his peripheral VISOR feed, so he turned just in time to see Riker striding through the main engineering entrance. He quickly stood between Anna and Riker and loudly said, “Uh, Commander? What can I do for you?”

He heard Anna scramble out of her chair behind him, but she must've thought she couldn't stay hidden well enough to his left towards the drive area where she liked to hide, because instead he heard her run to the right and go around the corner of the protruding wall panel.

If Riker noticed, he didn't say anything. He simply walked up to Geordi and said, "We'll be in position to use the tractor beam in less than an hour."

Geordi sat down in Anna's discarded chair to make her hasty exist less obvious. "You didn't come all the way down here at this hour to tell me that."

Riker leaned on the edge of the console and admitted, "No, I didn't. Geordi, I may have seemed a little harsh about the situation aboard the Raman. I just don't like the idea of one of my best officers putting himself in unnecessary danger.

Not in the mood to be further badgered on it, Geordi bluntly replied, "I guess I feel like I should be the one to decide whether it's unnecessary or not."

"My mother died when I was a baby," Riker said. "All I have is pictures, and the stories that my father used to tell me about her. I begged him to tell those stories over and over." He moved to sit on the console closer to Geordi; a habit that annoyed all of the engineers but none wanted to be the one to tell the first officer to keep his butt off of the technology.

Riker continued, "When I was five and I went to school, I started to tell my new friends those same stories, pretending that she was alive. Then I started believing that she was alive, that she'd just gone away, that she was coming back. The teacher got wind of this, and she and my father had this talk with me. They told me it was important to accept the fact that my mother was dead and that she wasn't coming back, and all the hoping in the world wouldn't make it so. In my mind, that was the day that my mother actually died. I cried all that night. But after that, it started feeling better."

Geordi could readily see Riker's trauma playing out on his face as he told the story, and if he hadn't been in the midst of his own turmoil he likely would have felt a great deal of sympathy for the Commander. But having Riker dump more tragedy on him when he was in the middle of his own angered him, especially delivered as some kind of morality tale that was clearly supposed to make him give up his own mother for dead. "Your mother was dead," Geordi bluntly declared. "There was proof. There was a body, and a funeral. It was a reality."

"Geordi..." Riker began.

Geordi's anger rose further and was barely kept in check by recognising the chain of command. "If I could see a body, if there were wreckage, I could accept it, but my mother has just disappeared." He rose, not liking the way Riker was towering over him, literally or metaphorically. "And now, there's a possibility that she is alive. And I'm not going to quit. Not yet."

Geordi defiantly turned his back on his superior officer and made a show of tapping at his console.

Riker sighed behind him, then got up off of console and said, "Let's see what we find when we pull the Raman out with the tractor beam."

Geordi didn't reply, so a moment later Riker walked out.

Geordi let out a long sigh, only then realizing he'd been holding his breath. He dropped back into his chair, suppressing his urge to throw something.

He heard something to his right and turned to see Anna peeking out from behind the panel. "Sorry about that," he said, frustrated that the command staff were continually disregarding his request to stay away from her.

Anna tentatively came around the corner. "Hardly your fault. You at least gave me enough warning to jump out of the way."

"You shouldn't have to," he grumbled, but then added, "Sorry, I'm angry at the situation, not at you."

"I know. Um...I tried really hard not to eavesdrop, but..."

"It's fine."

“Is it?” she asked as she returned to her chair. “Because it sounded like your mother is still alive?”

“Yeah, only nobody believes it except me.”

She shrugged at him. “I might.”

Relieved to have someone willing to listen, he summarised the situation for her, including the conversation he’d had with his mother on the Raman.

Anna blinked rapidly in astonishment. “Wait, so there’s a chance the Hera’s down there and command doesn’t want to risk checking it out?” In sudden anger she growled, “Jiminy Crickets, why does that sound familiar?”

Oh shit, I didn’t even think about that similarity, Geordi thought. He carefully tried to walk it all back a bit. “I guess it’s different because Starfleet knew the Baltimore was on Covaris Two. If I had that much proof, they’d be willing to do more.”

But Anna remained angry, which he found reassuring as it legitimised his own anger. She asked, “How much proof does a life require to be worth rescuing?”

He leaned forward, paused in thought for a moment, and then replied, “That’s a damned fine way of putting it.”

“Maybe this isn’t my place to stick my nose in, but when I found out that the Yosemite had come to Covaris and decided I wasn’t worth rescuing, I swore that I’d never, ever stand by and let the same thing happen to anybody else. So pardon me for being blunt but even if it’s really unlikely that the Hera is on the surface, not even trying is...well...cowardly.”

Geordi whistled a little. “That’s...a very strong word.”

“I have very strong feelings about this sort of thing.”

“Yeah. I guess you would.”

They sat facing each other in silence for a moment as they both came to the same conclusion and could read it on the other’s expression.

Geordi carefully said, “It’s a pretty big risk to try getting back into that suit by myself.”

She stood up. “Then don’t do it by yourself.”

“Anna, I don’t want to drag you into this.”

“You’re not. I’m butting in.”

He stood as well. “You sure about this?”

“I’m sure that it’s right to try.”

Geordi nodded. “Okay. Come on.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Stardate 47216.3 (Friday 20/03/2370, 22:47) — Deck Twenty-Five
— Cybernetics Lab A

On the way up the turbolift, Geordi gave Anna a quick primer on the interface suit's technology and how she could best assist him by standing at the suit's control panel on the platform but also keeping an eye on the medical sensor panel on the wall beyond.

As they entered the lab, he said, "But seriously, Anna, you can still back out if you want to. I wouldn't blame you one bit."

Anna gave him a dire glance, walked up to the platform console, and then bitterly said, "I would. I blame a lot of people for leaving me to rot on a Class L planet for nearly twenty years."

"Yeah," Geordi said as he went towards the suit where it hung on the wall.

"Class L was awful. What's this one? Gas giant, right?"

"Yep."

"J or T?"

"Uh, T," Geordi replied as he stepped into the suit.

"That stands for trouble," she muttered, and then quietly sang, "*Trouble with a capital T and that rhymes with G and that stands for Geordi's mom and her crew.*" She turned to him to add, "Just thinking of people trapped in a ship under that crushing atmosphere makes me furious. If you weren't getting into that suit, I would be."

Geordi half smiled. "It takes training to use."

She turned back to the operations console. "I'm a quick study when lives are on the line."

"I don't doubt it," Geordi said as he pulled the rest of the suit on and walked over to the console to stand beside her. "Here, this is the key part I need you to — oh, you've already set it."

She glanced over her shoulder at him and raised an eyebrow.

Geordi nodded. “Thanks. It means a lot to have you here, in a lot of ways.”

Anna nodded in return. “We should get started. Those people don’t have a lot of —“

At that moment the door to the lab opened and Data entered. He glanced at Anna briefly, but then turned to Geordi and said, “I suspected you would attempt to operate the interface alone.”

“Did you?” Geordi snapped.

Data calmly replied, “I am familiar enough with your behaviour patterns to predict certain decisions.”

“Well I guess you know me pretty well,” Geordi chided. “But as you can see, I’m not alone.”

Data looked at Anna again, but she kept her eyes fixed firmly on the console in front of her. Data turned back to Geordi. “You are disobeying the Captain.”

Anna quietly grunted.

“I can’t just sit back and do nothing when I know that my mother may be down on that planet,” Geordi said, reaching behind to tap a key on the console and gesture to Anna where a status indicator had lit up.

“I cannot allow you to endanger your well-being, even with well-intentioned support,” Data said as he stepped up onto the platform.

“Data, if I leave without knowing for sure, then I’ll have to live with that for the rest of my life,” Geordi said, emphatically patting his chest, “wondering if I left her to die. I couldn’t do that. That’s why I’ve got to do this.” He turned back to the console and tapped more keys.

Anna nodded and began to set the parameters of the highlighted fields. Without taking her eyes off of the console, she said, “Data, you just told me that it’s Starfleet policy to try to rescue people and ships even in hopeless cases.”

Data’s brow furrowed for a moment, and then he said to Geordi, “I could have you confined to quarters for the duration of the mission.”

“If that’s what you need to do, Data, then do it. Because nothing short of that is going to stop me from trying to save my mother.”

Data continued to regard Geordi for a moment, then turned, left the platform, went to the medical sensor panel, and began to set more parameters there.

“What are you doing?” Geordi asked.

“I will monitor the interface and attempt to keep you safe along with Anna.” Then he turned around and said, “I cannot have you confined to quarters for something you have not yet done.”

Geordi warned, “You know we could get in a lot of trouble for this.”

Data tilted his head to the side. “There is a high degree of probability that you are correct.” Then he said to Anna, “Do you understand that?”

She shrugged. “I’m not Starfleet. Nobody ordered me not to try. What are they going to do, strip me of this Specialist label they pushed me to accept?”

Data’s brow went up. “Hm,” he said, and the two of them shared a brief but intense look of understanding.

Geordi said, “Thanks, Data.”

Data nodded. “However, I do have a request,” he said as he returned to the platform and picked up the cranial portion of the interface from the console.

Anna looked up at him when he was beside her, her expression much softer than before. He nodded at her appreciatively and then turned to bring the part to Geordi, who had entered the interface’s control zone.

“Yeah? What’s that?” Geordi asked.

As they exchanged the cranial interface for Geordi’s VISOR, Data said, “I would ask you to consider the possibility that what you see is not real.”

“I will. I promise.”

Data nodded again, then turned to place the VISOR on the top of the console. Anna stepped aside for him, and he tapped several keys. “I am establishing the interface.”

Anna moved to the medical sensor panel instead, but Geordi’s vision was already transferring to that of the probe so he didn’t see her go.

As soon as he could perceive the auxiliary control room of the Raman once more, Geordi called out, “Mom? Mom?”

Her voice came suddenly from behind him. “Hello, Geordi.”

“Mom, how did you get here?”

“I’m not really with you, Geordi. I’m on my ship, on the surface. We were pulled into a warp funnel.”

“That’s just what I thought,” Geordi said excitedly. “How are we communicating?”

“We found a way to send a subspace signal that could cut through the atmospheric interference.”

Data asked, “Geordi, are you seeing the image of your mother?”

“Yes, and she’s just confirmed everything I’ve been saying.”

“I am reading unusual subspace energy in your vicinity, similar to what the probe sensor recorded the first time you encountered your mother,” Data reported.

“That’s how she’s communicating with me. It’s the only kind of signal they could send that could cut through the interference.”

Captain La Forge told Geordi, “We need your help.”

“I’ve been thinking about this,” he replied. “I’m going to take the Raman into a low stationary orbit and initiate an inverse warp cascade.”

“Why?” she asked.

“The subspace distortion from the cascade should reverse the warp funnel. Your ship will end up right back where it started.”

But Data warned, “Geordi, the atmosphere becomes increasingly turbulent the farther down you go. You may not be able to bring the Raman close enough to the Hera before being destroyed.”

“I have to try, Data.”

Anna tapped out some information on the console below the health monitor screen. “I’m sending through some calculations on minimizing the turbulence by realigning the inertial dampeners to a storm setting.”

“Thanks, Anna, good thinking,” Geordi replied.

“We’re running out of time,” Captain La Forge said, sounding more desperate.

Geordi configured new settings on the Raman’s auxiliary controls via the probe and then announced, “Shields back online. We’re starting our descent. Thank god.”

“Thank god?” his mother asked, seemingly confused.

“That you’re alive,” he said. “That I was right about all of this. I can’t wait to call Dad. He and Ariana had given up.”

His mother backed away slowly and said, “We’re going home.”

“Well, eventually, yeah,” he began, but when he turned to say more to his mother, his vision began to flicker and fade. “Data, everything’s fading in and out. I’m losing the interface.”

“The probe is descending out of range,” Data reported.

“You’ll have to turn up the input gain to maintain my connection.”

“We are already at seventy five percent of tolerance,” Data warned, looking over the console to Anna and the medical sensor information.

Anna checked the readings, turned, and shrugged. “I’m an engineer, not a doctor, but these numbers aren’t terrible, I don’t think,” she said.

“Data, you can turn it all the way up to a hundred if you do it slowly enough. Give my nervous system chance to adjust,” Geordi said.

Anna shrugged again and mouthed, “I don’t know?” at Data.

Data nodded at Anna and read the medical information over her shoulder. “That is theoretically true, but even at this level of input you are already experiencing dangerous neural feedback.”

Anna turned back to the medical screen, saw what Data meant, and put her hands over her mouth with worry.

“There are over three hundred people on board the Hera, Data. We’re the only chance they’ve got,” Geordi implored.

Anna quietly asked, “Is there something I can do to lower the neural feedback?”

Data shook his head at her, and then returned his focus to the control panel before him. He reluctantly said, “I will increase the gain incrementally as you descend.”

Geordi’s visual input stabilised. “It’s working,” he reported.

“When we are ready to disconnect the interface, we must allow enough time to lower the input levels, otherwise your nervous system will go into shock from the sudden drop in input.”

“Once I initiate the warp cascade we can start dropping the gain,” Geordi replied.

“Understood,” Data said.

On the Raman, Geordi said to his mother, “We’ll be in sensor range of the Hera within a few minutes. Mom, I’m really sorry I didn’t come by to see you a few weeks ago.”

“You were too busy with work” she replied.

“Yeah, well, I’m sorry. It won’t happen again,” Geordi promised.

When Anna and Data overheard him, she put her hands on her heart and wiped away a tear. Data nodded at her again and then continued to carefully monitor his friend’s dangerous descent.



Meanwhile on the bridge, Worf frowned at his console. “Captain, the Raman is descending toward the planet.”

Picard and Riker exchanged a worried look.

“Geordi,” Riker said.

“Damn it,” Picard replied, launching out of his chair and heading for the turbolift.



In the cybernetics lab, Data reported, “We are at ninety percent of tolerance. My calculations show you will reach one hundred percent of tolerance before you are in range of the Hera.”

“Then we’re going to have to go beyond tolerance,” Geordi declared.

Anna shook her head and hurried over to stand by Data up on the platform. She whispered, “We’ll have to try something else to rescue them,” as she wrung her hands together.

Data nodded again. He said firmly to Geordi, “That would not be advisable. You must cease your descent.”

Captain La Forge rushed towards Geordi’s probe on the Raman and begged, “No, Geordi, don’t, please.”

Geordi looked into his mother’s eyes and could not refuse her. “Data, I’m taking this ship down. Now, if you don’t boost the gain past tolerance levels, I’ll lose the interface when we go out of range and my system will go into shock.”

Anna turned to Geordi in grave concern, then whispered to Data, “I’m sorry. I don’t know what we should do.”

Data adamantly replied, “Geordi, you are putting me in a difficult position. Please, cease your descent.”

“I won’t do it, Data. You’re going to have to increase the tolerance.”

Anna put her hand over her mouth and tears began to roll over her cheeks and fingers.

Data hesitated, began to reply but then stopped, hesitated again, and then conceded, “Disengaging safety systems. Going to full tolerance levels...now.”

“Thank you, Data,” Geordi said emphatically.

But instead of replying to Geordi, Data turned to Anna and quietly said, “We will undoubtedly have attracted the bridge’s attention. It is likely that command staff will arrive soon.”

Anna glanced at Geordi again, and then back at Data, her eyes full of fear.

Data assured her, "I will take care of him. You have done all you can. You should go."

Anna began to cry more, but she nodded and fled the room.

"We're getting close," Geordi reported to his mother.

"Thank god," she replied, imitating Geordi's earlier intonation.

Moments later Picard came striding into the room with Crusher close on his heels. Picard went directly up onto the platform and barked, "Commander La Forge."

"Yes Captain," Geordi said in a formal tone of acknowledgement.

"Stop your descent. Prepare to disengage the interface," Picard ordered as Crusher began scanning Geordi with her medical tricorder.

"Sorry, Captain, but I can't do that," Geordi said defiantly.

"Damn it, Geordi," Picard snapped, "you're going to kill yourself!"

"If I come back now, my mother and her entire crew will die."

Picard sighed in angry frustration.

Geordi said to his mother on the Raman, "I'm scanning for your ship. I'm not getting anything."

"We're still too far away," she replied.

Confused, he said, "No, not really. I should be picking something up by now. I'm not finding anything. There's no warp funnel, no ship. There's nothing there."

As Geordi's doubt increased, Captain La Forge came up behind him and put her hands on either side of the top of the probe, lined up with Geordi's head through the interface. Suddenly, small bursts of visible energy shot out from her fingers and into the probe, making Geordi twitch as if he was being electrocuted.

In the laboratory, the others witnessed Geordi begin to twitch and grunt; it was clear something was terribly wrong.

"Doctor, report," Picard ordered.

"His neural synapses are overloading. He can't survive this," Crusher said desperately from the medical sensor console.

"Geordi, what's happening to you?" Picard demanded.

In a quaking voice with a shaking body to match, Geordi stammered, “Reverse...tractor beam...”

Data immediately complied on the probe’s controls and called out, “Reversing tractor beam.”

Geordi inhaled briskly as his mother was thrown back off of him. He turned to see her take the form of the flames he’d seen before, and then once again become the image of his mother.

Realizing he’d been duped, Geordi asked, “What are you?”

“You’re killing us. We must go down,” she replied.

Picard asked, “Geordi? What’s happening? Report!”

But Geordi ignored him and asked the faux Captain La Forge, “You’re...you’re trapped?”

Picard turned to Crusher. “Is there any way that we can disconnect him?”

“If we take him off too abruptly, he’ll go into neural shock,” she replied.

“Caught on the ship?” Geordi asked.

Picard said, “Reduce the input gradually, and still get him out before it’s too late.”

Geordi continued his conversation with someone those in the lab could neither see nor hear. “Are you saying that you killed the Raman’s crew?” he asked.

“Perhaps we could deceive his neural receptors,” Data suggested.

“Deceive them?” Picard asked.

“By feeding them the sensory information recorded from his earlier experiences with the probe,” Data explained.

Crusher nodded. “We could disconnect the interface and still maintain the input levels.”

“We could then lower them in a controlled manner,” Data said.

Meanwhile Geordi asked the entity on the Raman, “What do you want?”

Picard understood. “Like a decompression tank? Let’s try it.”

“Then, it was an accident?” Geordi said via the probe, but then addressed those in the lab. “Captain, I have to take the ship into the lower atmosphere.”

“Explain,” Picard replied.

“As I understand it, when the Raman got close to the planet it accidentally picked up some lifeforms that live in the lower atmosphere. Subspace beings of some kind. Intelligent. When the ship went back into a higher orbit, the beings were trapped.”

“How do you know all this?” Picard asked.

“One of them can communicate with me. It must have read my thoughts through the probe interface and took the form of my mother to try to talk me into taking the ship closer to the surface.”

“Are these beings responsible for the death of the Raman’s crew?” Picard asked.

“Yes, but I don’t think it was on purpose. They probably tried communicating with them the same way they’re communicating with me, by directly accessing their thoughts. It must’ve been fatal to the crew. I guess the interface is what protected me.” Geordi once again accessed the Raman’s controls via the probe. “I have to take them back, Captain. They can’t survive so far up in the atmosphere. I’ll turn the ship around and come back as soon as I’m —“

The Raman began to shake and several electrical discharges coursed through the controls, making Geordi grunt in discomfort.

“Geordi, what’s happening?” Picard asked.

“The atmosphere is getting more turbulent. It’s overloading the systems. I’m having difficulty keeping the shields up.”

But then all of a sudden the image of his mother declared, “Geordi. We’re safe now. Goodbye.” She turned into a flame again and disappeared through the bulkhead.

The Raman rocked violently and more consoles discharged arcs across the control room, causing several loud bangs and sending sparks flying everywhere.

“I’m losing power!” Geordi reported. “Total shield failure in eight seconds.”

Picard asked, "Can we switch the input?"

"Almost," Crusher replied as she and Data frantically fed the interface the previously recorded sensory information.

"Shields are failing!" Geordi shouted as the Raman began to break apart around him.

"Switching inputs," Crusher said as Geordi's whole body went rigid. She ran back up to the platform and injected him with a hypospray as Data finalised the switchover and turned to Geordi with a concerned expression.

"Is it working?" Picard asked.

Crusher scanned him again with her tricorder and reported with relief, "His vital signs are stabilising. He's going to make it."

Picard nodded and sighed in frustration once again, albeit more relieved this time that it was finally over.



Stardate 47216.4 (Friday 20/03/2370, 23:48) — Ready Room

Picard had intended to write his official report, but once he entered his ready room and noticed the time, he stood in the middle of the room rubbing his forehead, wondering if it could all wait until the morning.

He put his hands on his hips, shook his head, sighed again at the whole nonsense, and was about to go to the replicator for an ill-advised late-night tea when his combadge piped up with, "*Crusher to Picard.*"

He tapped it and said, "Picard here," worried Geordi had taken a turn for the worse.

Thus he was much relieved when Beverly replied, "*I've just released Geordi. He's physically fine, but tired and emotionally shaken.*"

"Undoubtedly."

"*He's on his way to you now, I think to explain himself.*"

Picard sighed again. “Surely that can wait until morning.”

“I don’t think it can for him. It’s all hitting him very hard right now. I know he messed up and I’ve already given him a stern but gentle earful on it. He knows too. Scold him as much as you need to, Jean-Luc, but keep in mind what he’s endured throughout all of this, please.”

“Understood, doctor, thank you,” he said, tapping the badge off before she could give him any more command directives. He glanced again at the replicator, grunted in its direction, and went to his desk to adopt an officious pose instead.

A few minutes later, the door chimed and La Forge entered, looking quite exhausted and ashamed. He approached the desk and said, “Sir, I know it’s late but I’ve come to apologise. I let my personal life cloud my professional judgement. I know there’s no good excuse for what I did. I’m sorry.”

Picard replied in the way he had to, the way he was expected to. “You disobeyed my direct order. You put yourself in grave danger. I am not happy.”

“Yes, sir. I take complete responsibility. Data was only —“

“I will deal with Mr. Data at another time. Meanwhile, I will have to write this incident into your permanent record.”

“Yes, sir,” La Forge said again, deferential and clearly anticipating that result.

Picard said, “Dismissed,” for the formality of it, but as Geordi turned to leave he immediately softened his tone and added, “Geordi?”

Geordi paused and turned back to face him.

“I’m very sorry that you didn’t find your mother,” Picard said in earnest.

“Thank you, sir,” Geordi replied. “You know, it was funny. When I was down there, it was so real. I felt like I had a chance to say goodbye.” With that, he turned and left.

Picard sighed again. He sat at his desk for several minutes contemplating the entire thing, then stood and went to the ready room door.

When it opened, he saw Data sitting at the ops station. Data turned to look at him. *For a man who purports to have no emotion, I can see at least six operating behind those eyes*, Picard thought. *Well then, best to get it all out tonight*. He made the slightest directional motion with his head; Data nodded in reply and rose from the ops chair to come into the ready room as well.

Picard went to the sofa and sat on one side, indicating with his hand that Data should sit as well. But Data's brow furrowed and he remained standing. *Oh hell, he wants a scolding too*, Picard realised. *And I probably ought to give one, but I'm far too exhausted. Well let him stand, then, if that suits him*.

"Sir," Data began, "I must report that I wilfully disobeyed orders. I cannot allow Geordi to assume all of the responsibility for —"

"Yes, yes, the two of you are as eager as ever to fall on your swords for each other. I suppose that's what comes with a tightly bonded senior staff."

"Yes sir."

"Mr. Data, I'm not even going to bother delineating the transgressions to you because I know you're fully aware of them all."

"I am, sir, yes."

"From my side of things, I want to treat it as a simple act of disobedience, but the revelation that Starfleet had inadvertently trapped intelligent beings throws a spanner in the works, doesn't it?"

"And an entire bulkhead, sir."

Picard was momentarily startled. *Did Data just make an unscripted joke? Or is he merely being pedantic as usual? What's gotten into him lately?* But Picard shook the thought away to ask, "Was Geordi already interfaced with the probe when you arrived at the lab?"

"No sir. He was preparing to do so. I attempted to dissuade him, but once it became apparent that he intended to activate the suit regardless of my disapproval I decided the best way to keep him

safe was to assist him and attempt to get him to admit his mother was not there.”

“But you knew he was disobeying an order.”

“Yes sir. I was caught between conflicting ethical goals.”

Picard nodded slowly. “If it is your own command you seek, you will need to learn how to navigate a great many conflicting interests and goals.”

“Yes sir.”

“So what did you learn today?”

Without missing a beat Data replied, “That the greatest good often involves what would otherwise constitute unacceptable risk. That believing the stated experiences of a friend and fellow officer has value beyond initial likelihood calculations. That we cannot claim to have learned from past mistakes if we repeat them.”

None of that was what Picard had expected, and he found himself thrown by Data’s sudden and ready embrace of the very philosophical questions the android usually struggled with. “Past mistakes?” Picard asked.

“Yes sir. Not only was I caught in an ethical conundrum pertaining to my closest friend and colleague, but my newest friend’s assertion that Starfleet has a history of choosing safety over improbable rescue presented me with an opportunity to demonstrate that we do indeed prioritise rescue even in unlikely, unusual cases.”

A chill went through Picard. “Anna White was there in the lab?”

“Yes sir. She has repeatedly indicated that she resents Starfleet for what she perceives as wilful abandonment, and was quite intense in her support for Geordi’s need to attempt to rescue his mother. I found it very difficult to argue against either of them even though I did not believe the Hera was on the planet at all.”

“You fell on the side of trying, just in case.”

“Not entirely sir. I believed it was ultimately the wrong decision, but I also believed that neither Geordi nor Anna would be dissuaded, hence my decision to support them. In hindsight, I am

compelled to point out that rescue was indeed required, albeit not by who appeared to be requesting it. Therefore I have learned when orders potentially conflict with values, the value of always attempting a rescue is more important than any potential career damage caused by failing to follow the order.”

Picard sighed yet again. This was not going as he’d planned at all, especially not with Anna thrown into the mix.

Data continued, “I also learned it is important to avoid getting myself into a situation where my good intentions may be manipulated beyond my ethical boundaries, but that it is impossible to be certain of that danger until it is too late to avoid it. I have learned that sometimes friends you otherwise trust to respect your ethical boundaries may push you beyond them when their need is extreme. I have learned these matters are difficult and complicated and have no easy answers.”

“No indeed they do not,” Picard replied, a bit tersely. The late hour combined with the unexpected turn of this conversation made him irritable. He decided it was best to let it all go for now and talk it out in calmer terms another day, so he said, “Very well, dismissed.”

Data nodded and headed towards the door, but when he reached it he paused and said, “Captain?”

“Yes Data?”

“Captain Carlo Varga was the captain of the USS Yosemite on stardate 27845.2 when it investigated the loss of contact with the Baltimore. It was Varga’s decision to not risk his crew to mount an unlikely rescue based on the lack of life signs and dangerous thermobaric storms of Covaris Two.”

“Yes, Data, what of him?” Picard said, not wanting to think about any of that any more than he had to.

“I have read Captain Varga’s public apology to Anna issued after she returned to Earth. It left a profound impact upon my ethical programming. I do not ever wish to have to write such a document myself. I am not certain if Anna has ever read it, but even if she has, she clearly does not forgive him. I surmise that is a

significant emotional burden for him to bear.” With that, he left the ready room.

Picard groaned, leaned forward, put his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.



Stardate 47216.5 (Saturday 21/03/2370, 00:23)

After leaving the bridge, Geordi went to his quarters and sat on the edge of his bed, wondering if it was worth bothering to try to sleep. They were already heading for Starbase 84, so it was tempting to throw himself into work rather than lie in bed frustrated.

He nodded to himself, weighed his options, and headed down to main engineering.

Night shift was underway, and the crew he encountered all gave him the same grim little smile of sympathy. Geordi began to question the wisdom of being around people at all, but then noticed Anna at her regular console behind his desk. She turned and shrugged at him sheepishly.

“What’re you up to?” he asked as he approached.

“Not much. Mostly waiting to see if you needed any more help, I guess. Or maybe I shouldn’t be encouraging you to do dangerous stuff. I’m sorry,” she said with a guilty cringe.

Geordi sat in his chair. “You didn’t. I would’ve ended up trying to do it on my own even if I hadn’t talked to you about it at all. Difference is, I did it with someone making me feel heard. You were the first person in all of this to validate my feelings about it all.”

“That’s...a good thing, right?” she asked tentatively.

“Yeah, Anna. That’s a really good thing. And an important thing, given that we saved those other beings.”

Her brow furrowed in confusion. “Other beings?”

“Oh right...you left before I figured out that wasn’t my mother.”

“Wait, what? Everyone’s talking about how the Raman was lost and there was no sign of the Hera, but nobody’s saying anything about your mother or anyone else.”

Geordi summarised the events for her while she sat with her jaw dropped at it all. When he was done she said, “Jiminy Crickets and a half. So you saved a whole bunch of intelligent creatures that Starfleet otherwise would have killed.”

“Well, not quite. We didn’t know. The Raman crew died before they could help or report on any of it. And it wasn’t just me that saved them, it was all of us in the end, together, including the help and support you’d given.”

“Oh I hardly did anything that actually got used.”

“No, Anna, you keep missing the point that your support and your insistence on doing the right thing all helped. I’m never going to forget that. Thank you.”

“Um, okay. You’re welcome, I guess. But it’s still sad for the Raman crew, and whatever happened to the Hera.”

“Yeah.”

She twisted her hands together in her lap and looked away for a moment, but then blurted out, “Geordi, I’m going to just lay it out that I have no idea how to be around someone grieving. I want to help but I know I probably can’t and that it’s not about me anyway. So if there is anything I can do, anything you need, I’ll always do it, even if that’s to shut up and go away right now, but I need you to tell me it’s what you want because I don’t know anything about anything with this stuff.”

He half-smiled at her. “It’s okay. I don’t think anyone really knows how to deal with grief. They say talking about it is better than bottling it up, but mostly it’s one of those things we all have to get through when it happens.”

“If you want to talk, I’m happy to sit here and listen. If you want to tell stories about her, I love hearing about families.”

“Thanks. Maybe some day, but right now I think I just want to bury my head in some work for awhile.”

“Do you want me to go work somewhere else?”

“No, no, you’re fine. Thanks for everything. It’s okay, Anna. I’m okay.”

She nodded at him, and then they each turned to their consoles and began poking idly at various lingering tasks to do with the upcoming installation.

But after a few minutes, Geordi found himself replaying old memories, and the more he thought of, the more bubbled up, all wanting to be considered. He chuckled at the memory of the sound of his mother playfully chasing him and his sister around, threatening tickles. Leaning back in his chair, he said, “You know, now that you’ve mentioned family stories, maybe I do want to talk about them.”

Anna turned back around. “Like I said, I’m happy to listen, if you want.”

“Actually...yeah. If you’re sure. I mean, doesn’t it bother you to hear stuff like that since...you know...you didn’t have it?” he asked cautiously.

“That’s exactly why I love it. We all want to hear about the adventures we couldn’t have.”

“I guess that’s true. Want to go over to the break room? I just realised I haven’t eaten in hours.”

Anna nodded, so they stood and went down the corridor with Geordi already allowing the memories to tumble out. “My mom she’s just...she was just this amazing person. I guess most people think that about their mom, but most people were able to see their mom’s face. Before I got my first VISOR, I didn’t even really understand visual concepts but I knew when mom was giving me that ‘what the hell do you think you’re doing’ look,” he said with a laugh as they entered the otherwise empty break room.

He went to the replicator to call up some dinner while Anna took a seat at a nearby table. “I swear I could hear her expressions!” he continued. “I was that prototypical engineering kid, getting into things and taking them apart and making a huge mess just trying to understand the world, you know? I drove her

crazy but never once did I ever feel anything less than love from her,” he said as he set down a plate of traditional Somali baasto iyo suugo.

“Even when she’d come in the room and shout ‘Geordi La Forge, what in the name of all that is decent have you gotten into now?’ I still knew on some deep level that she supported my curiosity. I’d tell her what I’d been trying to figure out and she’d sigh and grumble about the mess or whatever I’d broken but then she’d sit beside me, right up close against me so I could feel her there, and she’d say, ‘Okay, let’s think of another way you can learn about that.’” He laughed again and took a bite of his dinner.

“Then later she’d set me up with a more reasonable assortment of parts or a PADD to listen to or whatever, and she’d always finish with, ‘And next time, young man, you ask first. I don’t want to clean up another one of these messes!’”

They both laughed.

“But then I ended up doing it again next time anyway. Not because I meant to, just because I’d get an idea or question in my head and I ran with it before thinking to ask mom or dad first. It was the same thing, over and over again, but always, always, always in the end she was there for me.” He sighed. “I never really thought about it before, but all through that, I wasn’t just learning about how machines fit together and worked; she was also teaching me about patience: patience in my own learning but also how to be patient with others. How to find something beyond the immediate mess at your feet and discover the value in the big picture even before I knew what a picture was.”

Anna leaned her chin into her hands. “That’s beautiful.”

“Yeah,” Geordi said, his heart heavy. “She was a beautiful person in every way.”

They sat in silence for a moment, Geordi pushing the food around idly on his plate, but then he laughed again as more memories came up. He took another bite and then asked, “You want to hear about the time I figured out how to blind-climb the

big tree in our backyard and got stuck up there so she had to give me verbal directions to get down?”

“Definitely!”

Amidst more cycles of laughter and sighs, the two sat in the break room throughout the night shift as Geordi poured out more childhood stories than he’d ever imagined were stored in his head, each opening a chest of dozens more, all while Anna absorbed every one of them in enchanted fellowship.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kimberly Chapman has been putting her head up onto the Enterprise D since TNG was still on the air. She is a professional writer with a traditionally published a novel and more recently has gone independent. She also formerly wrote for Network World Canada and ComputerWorld Canada. While trapped at home during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and inspired by the poignant events of the first seasons of Star Trek: Picard, she decided it was time to start writing down the daydreams she's held dear for most of her adult life and finally give herself the freedom to flesh out the fantasies that remain her mental health escapism.

Her children drew the pictures of her on this page.