

Mood Indigo

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Mood Indigo

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Summary

The Enterprise passes through a nebula. Deanna's away at a conference. Barclay gets fired from Riker's jazz band.

And Riker starts hearing strange music that no one else can hear.

"He's late," said Morse, the trumpeter.

Riker knew without checking his wrist chrono that Morse was right; like any good officer, he had an internal clock that ticked down the seconds with precision, aided by the warp core's predictable hums and the rhythmic shift of the Enterprise's deck beneath his feet. He adjusted the slide of his trombone and kept one eye on the door. "He'll be here," he said with a firmness he didn't feel. "Beta shift only just ended, and Reg is all the way down in engineering. Give him some time to make the hike."

"I just came off beta shift too, you know," said Valenti.

"You're a yeoman, Val."

Valenti shrugged. With a short sigh, Morse sat down on a squeaky stool and pivoted, short legs not quite touching the ground. The keyboardist, Gates, gave Riker a plaintive look.

"What'll we do in the meantime?" she asked. "I gotta be home by seven. I can't sit on my hands and wait for Reg to get his shit his together."

"Yeah, we don't have all day—"

But the doors to the rec room hissed open, and Riker's shoulders relaxed in faint relief as Barclay rushed inside. He gave Barclay a private, stern look — the kind that promised 'I'll talk to you later' — and gestured for him to join the band. The others boxed up their complaints and smoothed their faces over, which was admirable, but it created a frosty atmosphere that made Barclay falter.

"You ready, Reg?" Riker asked briskly, breaking through the coldness. "We were about to get started with a warm-up. Call and response."

Barclay gave a jerky nod. He slid into place, sweaty fingers slipping on the keys of his bass clarinet. "R-ready," he said.

But he wasn't, really. Riker tried to signal with his eyes that Reg's score was still closed. Barclay stared back at him, wide-eyed and uncomprehending.

"Page two," said Riker, pitching his voice like he was reminding the whole band and not just Reg.

Barclay mouthed 'Page two?' with furrowed eyebrows. At a loss, Riker leaned forward, reached over the stand, and opened Barclay's music to the correct page. He tried to do it subtly, without embarrassing him, and everyone in the band averted their eyes.

Riker tapped the exercise in question and raised an eyebrow at Gates. "Start us off," he said.

"You got it, boss," said Gates. She dipped her hands over the keyboard and began to play.

Almost immediately, a new issue represented itself. The first note Barclay blew screeched into Riker's ears, totally out of tune. With a wince, Gates jerked her hands off the keys and Riker lowered his trombone. They both stared at Barclay, who kept his head down even as

his cheeks turned red.

Riker's temper surged. At the *very* least, band members were expected to *tune their damn instruments* before practice. He kept his irritation under control and tried to infuse a little lightness in his voice when he spoke.

"Did you tune it, Reg?" he asked.

"I-I — of course I—" Barclay played a quick high-low lick and grimaced. "I'll tune it right now, Commander."

Normally, Riker would tell him that after hours, it's just 'Will.' But today he couldn't force himself to say it. He shot Gates and Morse a blank-faced look, urging them to stay professional while Barclay adjusted the length of his barrel. Amazed, Riker watched as Barclay blew a flat note and tried to manipulate it into normal just by changing his embouchure. When Riker cleared his throat, Barclay did it the proper way — or tried to. Instead of pushing his barrel in, he pulled it out.

"You're *flat*, Reg," Riker said. He gestured for Barclay to push the barrel in, and with a whispered apology — or excuse — or whatever, Barclay found the right note. The others continued to play flat until Riker impatiently strode to the replicator and requested a new reed. He tossed it to Barclay, who nearly dropped it.

Gates pointedly studied her watch and Barclay hastily secured his new reed and got back into position. Their keyboardist led them through the call-and-response until they were all warmed up, and Barclay's embouchure was firm.

"Okay," Riker said, chest swelling. He settled himself in front of the mic and gestured for Morse and Barclay to join him. "You guys got a chance to study the music?"

They nodded.

"We're going to be the stars for this one," Riker said, "so look sharp. Reg, you're gonna play in the lowest register you can manage. I'm going to go high. The goal is perfect harmony, got it?"

"Got it," Reg mumbled.

Riker studied Morse next to see if he was ready: firm jaw, eager flashing eyes. Good. He nodded to Gates and the smooth, lonely-sounding intro to Mood Indigo began. Riker closed his eyes and let the rhythm settle into him, one finger tapping on his trombone slide. He had the music set up in front of Barclay and Morse, but as for himself, he didn't need it. It was his job to know the band's sets better than anyone, regardless of his role in any particular performance, so he'd had the music memorized for weeks. As the keyboard picked its way forward, Riker took a deep breath and held the trombone's mouthpiece to his lips.

And all went well. At first.

The first three long, slow notes eased out in harmony. Three voices, clarinet and trumpet and trombone, joined together for a mournful funeral dirge. Riker kept his eyes closed, the tension in his face smoothing out as they executed the opening as flawlessly as he'd ever hoped for on a gig night.

But that was where things went wrong.

"Sorry," Reg muttered, wrenching the clarinet away from his lips as he blew a sour note. Riker ignored him and kept playing, waiting for Barclay to join back in. But it was several beats before Barclay complied, and when he did, he was a half-second too late, and this time he blew flat.

Riker closed his eyes tighter.

"Sorry," Reg said again.

Morse cut himself off with a scowl. Riker kept playing, letting his calm dedication to the music coax his partners back in. But Reg couldn't find his entry, and Morse wasn't willing to. With a sigh, a little red-faced from exertion, Riker let his trombone drop.

"Reg," he said with thin patience, "when you mess up, just *keep going*. Don't stop the song."

"Sorry," said Reg for the third time.

"Did you practice at *all*?" Morse demanded.

"I— of course I did. *I did*." Barclay stared down at his clarinet, ears going red. "Every night."

An embarrassed silence fell over the band. Nothing was more obvious than a musician who lied about practicing. Riker rubbed the bridge of his nose and paced away. When he circled back, he motioned for Barclay to join him at the music stand, where he traced a finger through the opening notes Mood Indigo and hummed it under his breath. He watched Barclay's face, making sure he heard every note, understood the pacing, could visualize it. Barclay's lips moved minutely as he shifted his tongue, his hands tracing out the fingering. The nerves smoothed away one piece at a time until Barclay's eyes were soft and his focus was totally on the music.

Riker raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Yes," Barclay said. "I think I got it. Can we go again?"

Morse grumbled under his breath — and Riker didn't blame him, but he gave him a warning look and got back into place. This time they made it through five measures, glorious and harmonized, before Barclay's fingers slipped on the keys and his lips came unhooked from

the mouthpiece, interrupting their harmony with a high squeak.

Riker squeezed his eyes shut. *Keep going*, he urged Barclay, *keep going*. After half a beat Barclay started up again, quiet and unsure. His embouchure was all wrong, his tongue placed too high in his mouth, and the notes came out whiny, flat. Morse, increasingly frustrated, blew harder and drowned Barclay out.

And their harmony was ruined, anyway, so Gates just stopped playing and got to her feet.

“I have to go,” she said coldly, passing Riker on her way out. In dismay, he gestured for Valenti to abandon the bass and get on the keyboard instead, but by the time Valenti slid over, Morse was stomping off the performance platform with a curse.

“Morse!” Riker snapped.

“There’s no point,” Morse snapped back. “You want to play something *else*, fine. We got plenty of standards with no clarinet. But until he gets some damn practice, I’m not doing Mood Indigo.”

God’s sake! Riker watched him go with a shake of the head. At his side, Barclay had shrunken into himself like a shivering chihuahua. Valenti picked out Chopsticks awkwardly to fill the silence, and when Riker turned, he saw the rest of his band watching him, waiting. They were mostly officers and enlisted men — only Gates was a civilian — and they looked to Riker naturally to handle leadership, organization, timekeeping. With a clipped sigh, he rested a hand on Barclay’s shoulder and pulled him aside.

“Walk with me,” he said.

Barclay dragged his feet like a prisoner marching toward the guillotine. Out in the hall, Riker scouted for an empty conference room or observation lounge, somewhere they could talk in private. In the meantime, he kept up a light, not-exactly-nagging conversation.

“You *have* been practicing, Reg?” he asked.

“Yes,” Barclay whispered.

“Because we’ve been working on Mood Indigo for two weeks now…”

“I’ve been practicing,” Barclay said. His blush came back with a vengeance. “I’m excited for — for a big part, Commander. I wouldn’t just…”

Riker studied him. He led Barclay into a private room, where a small viewport revealed the stars. Barclay had given him issues before in the band. He was only an occasional member, not suited to all these practices and performances; and they’d had minor problems with him before. A touch of tardiness; nothing so bad as showing up with an out-of-tune instrument or refusing to practice in his free time.

“Is there something wrong, Reg?” Riker asked finally, searching Barclay’s face. “Something going on at home?”

Barclay took a deep breath and pursed his lips.

“At work?” Riker prompted.

Barclay shook his head. Riker took a deep breath and thought over his options. Mood Indigo was a standard he’d been itching to try since he was stationed on the Enterprise, but first they’d had no trumpeter, then they’d lost Ensign Walker, their clarinet player, when he got stationed on the Crazy Horse. With Barclay’s bass clarinet and Morse’s skilled trumpet playing, they could achieve the perfect harmony that made Mood Indigo such a divine piece. Riker could almost hear it: the high hum of the trombone singing out, the low rumble of the clarinet just underneath it, the trumpet filling in their gaps. If they did it right, if the harmony would come together just so, they might even achieve the eerie “phantom player” Riker had heard when he first plugged into Duke Ellington’s 1941 recording as a kid. He’d been certain there was a fourth performer, a second trombonist, playing smooth and low. He could hear it — *everyone* could hear it! — but he couldn’t see it.

Without Barclay, his chance to hear that phantom player again — even better, to produce the phantom player himself — disappeared. Riker put a hand on Barclay’s shoulder and squeezed gently, dipping his head until Barclay met his eyes.

“You got this, Reg,” he said firmly. “You’re an excellent musician, especially when you get into it enough to forget there’s anyone listening. Hell, you’re good enough that I wouldn’t mind blindfolding you onstage if that helps. But in a band, everyone’s got a responsibility to each other, the same way you have a responsibility to your crew. You have to make sure your clarinet is tuned, Reg. You gotta show up on time. And you *got* to practice between sessions, or we’re never gonna pull this off.”

Barclay lowered his eyes. Riker hesitated.

“Look,” he said. “Our shifts don’t always align right, to make this convenient. But I can swing by your quarters the night before practice and help you out. Check in, make sure your clarinet is ready to go, that you got everything you need. And the day of, either I can walk you down to practice, or I can get Valenti to do it. You’re on his way.” He searched Barclay’s face, but the other man had closed himself off, becoming guarded. “Reg, you’re not in trouble,” said Riker, exasperated.

“Sure feels like it,” said Barclay in a sullen mutter. He shook Riker’s hand off his shoulder.

“What’s this attitude?” asked Riker, almost wounded.

“It’s just band practice, Commander. I get it when Geordi gets on my back in engineering; if I mess up there, somebody could get killed.” He shot a scowl out at the stars. “What happens if I mess up Mood Indigo? You don’t get your time in front of the mic. That’s all.”

This was so unfair that it took all of Riker's self-control not to go into First Officer Mode and berate Barclay up and down the corridor. Instead he took a steadying breath and said, "Barclay, I've had plenty of solos, and I'll have plenty more. We're doing Mood Indigo because we need a new jazz standard and this is what the band voted on. That's all. And you get to shine as much as I do. Morse, too."

Barclay muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "Whatever."

"Reg, you can think I'm a spotlight-hogging asshole if that's what you want to think. But you made a promise to this band that you'd do your part, and it's your responsibility to uphold that promise."

Barclay's nostrils flared. Still staring at the viewport, he said, "Are you done dressing me down, Commander? Can I go now?"

Eyes narrowed, Riker studied him again and noticed the shadows under his eyes, the light tint of redness to his lids. Insomnia? He scanned down Barclay's skinny frame. Had he lost a few pounds? Was he not eating?

Over a damn song? Riker re-calculated. Barclay wasn't acting like himself. This defiance, this sullenness, might be his normal baseline, but usually it was buried under a timid stammer and a tongue-tied shyness that wouldn't let Barclay show his anger at all. Something was wrong, and whatever it was, Barclay wasn't going to confide in him.

"Okay," Riker said, letting his breath out in a sigh. "Do you want to play Mood Indigo, Reg?"

For the first time, Barclay's hard expression fractured. He looked down at his long-fingered hands, twitching out the fingering necessary for his opening notes. "It's all I can think about," he murmured.

Riker's chest twisted. "Then work with me," he said. "I'm offering you a helping hand, here. Let me walk you to practice."

Barclay blew out a sigh and shook his head. He flexed his fingers and let his hands fall.

"Reg..."

But Barclay squared his shoulders. "Sorry, Commander," he said firmly. "You'll have to find someone else."

He was already striding toward the door when Riker managed a frustrated, "There *is* nobody else, Reg! You're the only damned person on the Enterprise who plays the clarinet!"

The doors hissed open and let Barclay through. His voice echoed back down the hall to Riker's ears.

"Then play another damn song!" he said.

Without Barclay, the next gig pulled out an old standard, one they hadn't quite done to death: Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars. Riker kept his eyes on the audience at Ten-Forward as he played, trying to suss out their interest level. Everyone gathered here had heard this one before at least once, and except for one quick, incurious glance toward the stage, no one even bothered to watch.

We might as well be chamber music, Riker thought, his stomach sinking.

Gates leaned toward the microphone, playing the keys even as she crooned the lyrics out in her best gravelly Frank Sinatra rumble. Across Ten-Forward, Deanna Troi wandered through the door and glanced around. She'd sensed him — Riker knew it instantly from the look on her face, like a bloodhound on the scent of something half-dead. When she found him, she just raised an eyebrow; and when he found a break in the music, Riker lowered his trombone a little and gave her a half-hearted smile.

What's wrong? she asked.

He couldn't focus on telepathy and his music at the same time. Riker took a deep breath and pressed his lips to the mouthpiece. He let his thoughts spiral toward Barclay, the disastrous practice session, the tense confrontation in the observation lounge, and hoped Deanna would pick up the tenor of his thoughts and understand. But when his eyelids fluttered open again, he saw that she'd drifted over to the bar and was deep in conversation with a lieutenant there, so maybe she hadn't been seeking out *his* emotions at all.

Good. He didn't need to dwell on it. He just needed—

The band clashed.

Riker fumbled his grip on the slide, eyes shooting wide open. Discordant notes tripped over each other and pierced right through his brain. He knew instantly there was no saving a flub this bad: it was like they'd done it deliberately! He jerked his mouthpiece from his lips and turned to face his band, eyebrows raised, hyper-cognizant of the sweat beading in his hair and the displeased stares of the audience.

"What the hell was that?" asked Riker.

Gates stared back at him accusingly, her fingers still hovering over the keyboard. Valenti puffed his cheeks out and looked away. That was all Riker needed to know that *he'd* been the one to mess it up. He stared down at his trombone in disbelief.

"What—?" he started. Had he missed a note? Skipped to the next measure? Morse took a step closer to him and lowered his voice, head bowed.

"Will," he said softly, "you started playing Mood Indigo."

A sizzling flash of embarrassment settled over Riker's skin. He played back the notes in his head. Yes. He could see where he'd gone wrong. And of course, his band could only hold out for so long when their trombonist was playing a totally different tempo, mournful and slow. Riker glanced back out at the audience, at the uncertain stares, and attempted a smile.

"We'll be back in a moment," he called out cheerfully. But when he turned to his band, his eyes were strained. "Blue Room," he said, motioning for Morse to take center. "Then do Autumn Leaves if I'm still not back."

Gates gave him a terse nod. He took his trombone with him, crossing the room to Deanna even as the band started up without him. She was still speaking to the lieutenant, but when she sensed Riker coming, she cut herself off and glanced over her shoulder at him, one eyebrow raised.

Sheepishly, Riker said, "Can I interrupt?"

The lieutenant edged away. Riker slotted into his place at the bar and sighed.

"Have you spoken to Barclay?" he asked.

Deanna's one raised eyebrow inched up a little higher. "You want to talk about Barclay?" she asked, gentle but pointed.

"He's..." Riker rubbed the back of his neck. "I had to cut him from the band. That's why I can't play."

Deanna's skepticism melted. She'd seen him in the past any time the band lost a member, whether to reassignment or sheer laziness. It was never pleasant. She smoothed one hand over Riker's forearm and gestured for Guinan to bring them a drink.

"He just wasn't practicing at all," Riker said. "He swore he was, but when he played, it sounded like he'd barely even glanced at the music."

"You and Lieutenant Barclay were probably fated to be poor bandmates," Deanna noted. She accepted their drinks, both bright pink and filled with ice and fruit, with a nod. "Thank you, Guinan." To Will: "You're a stickler for discipline, Will. Both on-duty and off-. There's a reason why the humble trombonist was elected band leader, just as there's a reason you made commander before thirty and earned an assignment as the flagship's first officer." She nudged his drink closer to him. "Think of the way you grew up."

He took a sip, his face darkening.

"Were you an organized child?" Deanna asked, bumping her shoulder against his.

"My dad used to brag that I memorized Mom's medication regimen by age two," Riker said distantly. "I had a system for where to put the bottles in the fridge. Which one she got in the morning, which ones she got at lunch..."

"Exactly my point," said Deanna. "Will Riker runs on a perfectly-tuned system of self-sufficiency, organization, and hard work." *And play*, she added mentally, earning a quick, sheepish smile. "If there's a job to be done, you simply do it. If there are too many moving parts, you simply break them up and tackle them one piece at a time." She let her little finger brush against his. "Barclay is ... different."

"I know that," said Riker quietly. "I offered to help him."

Deanna searched his face, her eyes soft.

"I said I'd walk him to practice," Riker explained. "And I'd check in with him the night before to make sure he had everything in place." He sighed. "He even said he liked the song. He said it's all he can think about. With that kind of motivation, you think he'd..." He shook his head. "Has he been seeing you?"

"No," Deanna said, looking troubled now.

"I don't think he's been sleeping right. *Or* eating properly." Which was another responsibility the band members had to each other, Riker thought, but if he said so aloud, it would just indulge the irritation rising inside him.

"I'll schedule a meeting with him," Deanna promised. "What about you, Will?"

He looked down at her in surprise. "Me?"

"How are you feeling?"

She was using a special tone, soft and understanding — the same way she'd spoken to him when his father was onboard, and after Tasha died on his watch. He furrowed his eyebrows at her. What had he done to earn a tone like that? Just because he flubbed a song?

And what did she expect him to say?

Riker changed the subject. "How are *you* feeling? You've got that conference coming up soon. Are you nervous?"

A half-smile lit up Deanna's face. "Not nervous for the presentation," she said. "I know my material."

"You certainly do," said Riker softly. She nudged his little finger with hers again, sending a jolt of shared affection through his mind. "Then what are you nervous about?" he asked. "Because I can sense..." Cognizant of the off-duty crewmen all around them, he finished the sentence with a wordless shrug.

"I suppose I'm nervous about seeing my old classmates," Deanna said. "Since the conference is so close to Betazed, many of the

attendees will be old friends of mine. And rivals.” She smiled, checking his face for jealousy. “And lovers.”

Riker waggled his eyebrows, earning a playful slap to the chest. Where Deanna’s hand touched him, she left an afterimage of warmth behind, a small spot over his heart in the shape of her palm. But the warmth cooled, and as he watched her take a drink, lips parted over the rim of the glass, a soreness settled in. Like a bruise. He lowered his eyes, staring down into the pink-stained ice in his glass.

There was someone she was particularly looking forward to. Someone she was especially nervous about. When he concentrated, he could almost see the face. Dark hair, towering height, lips curled into a perpetual smile. Someone who made her think of ribs aching from laughter, the scent of spring flowers and tall wild grass, the musical warmth of his voice in her head. Riker glanced sideways at her.

Tell her, said a voice in his head, a voice he’d been hearing since the day Picard welcomed him aboard the Enterprise. Deanna looked at him expectantly, as if she heard it too.

But tell her what?

Tell her, honestly, that he could maintain a relationship with her, knowing he might have to send her into battle someday? Because he could. Because he might have to someday. And it would kill him.

So what then? Tell her he would give up his position? Because he wouldn’t do that, couldn’t stop leading any more than he could stop breathing, stop playing music in his head at night.

Tell her that he still — that he’d always—?

But she knew.

Riker downed his drink in one gulp. He hefted his trombone into Deanna’s hands and nodded toward the head; he needed to rinse out his mouth before he rejoined the set.

But he *would* rejoin.

Because other than that minor misstep, that brief interlude where ‘Quiet Nights’ became ‘Mood Indigo’, he was fine.

“You need to get laid,” Gates told him flatly. “That’s your issue.”

The audience in Ten-Forward was trickling out, and a fresh set of petty officers was rolling in as charlie shift ended. The band had abandoned their performance platform for a drink at the bar, Riker’s second of the night.

“I don’t think Will of all people needs more sex,” said Valenti.

“And I don’t think my playing was *that* bad,” Riker protested.

“Will doesn’t need more sex *most* of the time,” Gates said, ignoring Riker’s complaint. “Because *usually* he’s proactive. He takes care of it without us holding his hand.” She gestured, with her drink, to a visiting group of politicians, at least three of whom were attractive as hell, and two of whom fit Riker’s curvy, brunette type. Which just made him think of Deanna, who was leaving tonight for his conference, and made his heart ache. “You can’t honestly tell me that on a normal day you wouldn’t be over there spreading your charm,” Gates said.

Riker sneaked a peek at them. One of the brunettes glanced his way. Her soft lips curved into a smile. A gulf of despair opened up in Riker and he turned back to his drink, color rushing to his cheeks and ears.

“He’s blushing!” Morse cried.

“Never thought I’d see the day,” said Valenti.

“See?” said Gates. “That’s *abnormal*, Will! You *need* to get laid.”

Gates was married to Ulliean-Pok-Ulliean, a noncorporeal yeoman whose formless brain was kept inside a containment field at all times. Will shot back his drink and said, “What the hell do you know about getting laid, Gates?”

She shrugged. “Some people need it, some people don’t. *You* need it. Otherwise you’re gonna keep playing Mood Indigo when you’re supposed to be setting a damn beat.”

Will’s flush grew a little darker. He couldn’t explain it — he was just glad it had happened *after* Deanna left for the night. If she’d heard him flubbing yet another song, she might have dragged him straight to the counselor’s office for a psych probe. He’d played it off well, he thought, by pretending that he’d made eye contact with a pretty guest and lost his focus — but the problem was, that pretty guest was at the end of the bar right now, making eyes at him, and his stomach was in knots.

“It won’t happen again,” said Will finally, his voice low.

Gates blinked, her smile fading. On Riker’s other side, Valenti paused mid-sip, and Morse went still, all three of them alarmed at Riker’s tone of voice.

“Will,” said Morse softly, “we were just ragging on you.”

“No, I know.” He sat up, making an effort to look cheerful. “I just—” Well, the easiest excuse was that his best friend was leaving for a

conference, and he was feeling more morose than usual as a result. But he couldn't possibly admit that to them. Something chafed inside him. If it were Worf leaving for a bat'leth competition, sure. If it were Data getting his positronic network realigned, fine. But when it was Deanna...

Riker glanced down the bar and met the politician's eyes. She didn't smile this time. She searched his face uncertainly, but hopefully, and Riker's stomach did a barrel roll.

"I..." he started, mouth dry. He gathered his trombone and pushed away from the bar. "I have to go."

He walked right past the politician without a backward glance.

That night, when Will had changed into his pajamas, he sent a mental probe down the hall to Deanna's quarters. She wasn't there. He knew this, intellectually. Her shuttle had departed at 2000, just as Gates and Morse started in with their teasing in Ten-Forward. Some distant part of him had even felt the moment Deanna crossed out of range and their mental link snapped away.

But still, out of habit, he checked.

Humming to himself, a little buzzed, Riker tapped the screen on his personal console. The lights were low, so the screen automatically dimmed to soothe his eyes. He called up a dictionary of musical themes, first published in North America in the early 20th Century. It was a favorite of his from childhood, his personal version of a fairy tale collection or poetry anthology, stuffed full with obscure melodies that had fallen out of favor during the Eugenics Wars. Riker sent the file to his PADD and tossed himself into bed with a sigh.

With one leg curled up, he scanned the dictionary. The index allowed him to search either by title or by note progression. And there was something in his head now, just three notes... Riker hummed it to himself, one two three, and slid his finger across the screen. He scanned the list of notation-only titles that matched the notes he was hearing in his head.

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Riker wrinkled his nose. Now he could hear the rest of the music. He should've recognized it sooner. Banishing it from his head, he set the PADD to randomize and studied the first symphony that came up. The themes unfolded in Riker's head at a glance; all he needed to do was scan the music, and he could hear it in his head, the bass rhythm, the tinkle of the piano, the slow swell of violins...

And halfway through a measure, those violins became a trumpet. And the quiet eerie harmony of a bass clarinet and a trombone joined in, and what had been classical music just seconds ago gave way to jazz.

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"Computer," said Riker, rubbing his temple, "play, ah ... play *I Sing the Body Electric*, Weather Report, full album."

"Playing 'Weather Report,'" said the computer pleasantly. The synthesizers started up. Mid-20th Century, jazz-rock, upbeat and somehow futuristic, even centuries in the past. Riker closed his eyes and pictured himself in the place of the keyboardist, tried to visualize which keys he would press in time to the notes.

Piano gave way to trombone. Riker's lips twitched, his tongue forming the perfect embouchure inside his mouth. His fingers flexed, curling loosely over an imaginary slide.

"Computer," he said softly, "off."

The computer stopped playing. The electric jazz of Weather Report faded away. In his bed, eyes closed, Riker could still hear music playing, notes curling up inside his ears.

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The next day, Riker went through the motions of shift turnover with static eating at his eyeballs and still-drying sweat prickling at his chest hair. He tried not to look too hollowed-out as he took the command chair. Why did the Klingon calisthenics have to take so much out of him today, when he was already suffering from a sleepless night and all those damn earworms playing in his head?

Riker squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them, blinking away the white spots in his vision, he could feel Worf's gaze lasering into him from behind.

Probably wondering why his commander had been disarmed so easily this morning. Or more likely, he was wondering how the hell someone could manage to yawn when they'd been pinned by a Klingon warrior, with a bat'leth at their throat. Riker grimaced at the memory. Thoughts of a shoddy sparring session segued into memories of his flubbed notes last night at the bar, and soon he was mentally gnawing at a dozen terrible images of himself botching his command role somehow. Ordering the Enterprise into the nearest star. Executing a loop-de-loop around a Romulan warbird and crashing through the shields. Firing a quantum torpedo out the starboard ports and straight into the shuttle bay.

Worrywart, said a voice in his head that almost sounded like Deanna.

Riker glanced sideways at her empty chair. His chest squeezed tight. He had to think of something else, quick.

Barclay! Now there was a distraction. As first officer, Barclay wasn't exactly under his direct supervision, but it was his job to make sure the whole crew synchronized. He'd noticed weight loss, sleeplessness, trouble telling time, and it was his job to make sure those problems didn't persist, or that Barclay got the help he needed while Deanna was gone. Riker pushed to his feet and adjusted his uniform with a tug.

Just having something to do energized him a little.

"Bridge to engineering," he said, tapping his combadge.

"*Engineering here,*" said Geordi's voice. Across the bridge, officers stirred, looking at Riker with mild curiosity.

"Geordi, are you alone?" Riker asked, keeping his voice jovial. There was a pause as Geordi *made* himself alone, out of earshot of his fellow engineers.

"*I am now,*" he said.

Riker paced across the bridge to Picard's ready room. It was empty now, and with a nod to Mr. Data, he stepped inside. "Geordi," he said, "how's Lieutenant Barclay?"

"*Reg?*" Geordi's voice was laced with confusion. "*He's alright. Why?*"

"I saw him a couple nights ago for band practice. He hadn't been sleeping." Riker chewed the inside of his cheek. "How's his performance?"

"*Uh, it's fine, Commander. I mean, he was five minutes late to work recently, but that was three days ago. He's been on time every day since.*"

Well, that was good news. So why did it feel wrong? Riker leaned on the back of the nearest chair and drummed his fingers against the upholstery. D, middle C, D ... D, F, C...

Mood Indigo. Self-consciously, Riker curled his fingers into the upholstery and stopped tapping.

"You haven't had any quality-control issues?" he asked Geordi. "Any errors in his calculations, or...?"

"*No, sir,*" said Geordi firmly. "*Maybe last week — he was all kinds of flustered last week. But lately he's been fine.*"

"Alright, Geordi. I don't mean to pick on him. I just..."

"*You're just worried,*" Geordi said almost affectionately.

He'd been talking to Deanna. Riker said, with as much dignity as he could muster, "Thank you, Geordi. That's all."

So Barclay was doing fine. Why the sudden change? Just because Deanna was gone? He wasn't still infatuated with her, was he? Riker played back his memory of last night, how Deanna came to watch them play. She always did, so long as she didn't have appointments. Maybe that was what had Reg so nervous, and Riker couldn't blame him. Then again, there was no reason to think Deanna had anything to do with it. Just because *Riker's* emotions were tied up in her presence (just because she made his heart sing when she was here) (just because the simple unexpected sight of her in a common area could make him smile) didn't mean that everyone else's were.

He rolled his shoulders with a sigh and headed back to the bridge.

The door hissed open. Blinding golden light seared into Riker's eyes as the bridge lights flared. Music swelled around him, loud enough to make him flinch. Trombone, trumpet, bass clarinet — a gentle pluck of the bass strings, a melodic tinkle on the piano — as his vision faded in, Riker squinted against a headache and scanned the bridge wildly, searching first for a live jazz band — because that was what he *heard* — and then, when he didn't find them, for a music speaker. He made his way to tactical and gently shouldered Worf out of the way, eyes narrowed as he studied the controls.

"Sir?" Worf asked, bristling.

A stab of pain lanced through Riker's temple. He grimaced down at the screen. Nothing was playing on the speakers.

"*Sir,*" said Worf again, insistently this time.

"Do you hear that?" asked Riker faintly.

"Hear what?"

The music swallowed Riker's voice whole. The trombone and the trumpet keened. The bass clarinet dipped into its lowest register, so low he couldn't tell the difference — where it started and the trombone began. He looked to the viewscreen and saw his own reflection staring back at him just as the phantom fourth player, the unknown instrument, came into play.

By the time the convulsions started, Riker's mind was already gone.

Waking was a nightmare.

The first thing he was cognizant of was a pounding heart and a desperate need to catch his breath. The taste of blood in his mouth came next, without pain. The tears on his face came second, but by the time he realized he was crying, *keening*, it had ended, and his throat was raw, and Beverly was gently wiping the tears away.

Sickbay, Riker realized, his mental faculties flooding back with instant calmness. "Will" turned off. "Commander Riker" turned on, moving through an efficient checklist of memories and data. Bright lights — headache — that music on the bridge. He tried to lift his heavy head and stared down the length of his body to his legs, which ached like he'd run a marathon, and Beverly tolerantly allowed him

to look for a moment. Then she eased his head back down and wiped the rest of the tears away.

“There,” she said softly. “It’s normal after a seizure, before your brain catches up with your body. Purely physiological, and not the most embarrassing thing you could do after convulsions.”

Riker touched his face with a shaking hand, the muscles of his arms strained. “A seizure?”

Beverly guided his hand back down to the bed. “You collapsed on the bridge,” she said. “Have you ever had seizures before?”

“No,” said Riker honestly, struck by the surrealness of it all. He had to work hard to lift his hand again, this time letting it fall on his chest. Dried blood crusted the front of his uniform, so he knew he must have bit clean through his lip. But when he touched his beard, it was soft and unmatted, like someone had gone at it recently, and with shampoo.

“I cleaned you up a little,” Beverly informed him.

“Thanks.” He let his eyes slide closed for just a second of rest. “What do you think?”

He heard the distinct click of a medical tricorder sliding open. “Well,” said Beverly, “I already checked for tumors, and you’re clean there. I thought perhaps you had scarring on the brain, especially after your time on Tilonus Four, when you jerked that probe out of your skull. But a full cranial scan showed nothing of the sort. Did you suffer any untreated head injuries that I don’t know about?”

“Untreated? No.” Riker sneaked another peek down the length of his body. Did he want to know what had happened while he was out? Probably not, but a swoop of preemptive humiliation rushed into his chest anyway, pushing for room alongside a dozen other emotions that Deanna could probably list with ease. If she were here. He pressed his palms against his aching eyes. “I heard music,” he said.

Beverly tilted her head to the side, studying him. “Upon waking.”

“No. Before.”

She was silent for a while, chewing the inside of her cheek. “That’s not uncommon,” she said finally. “Musicogenic seizures can develop late in life, too, so it wouldn’t be out of the ordinary if this is your first one.”

“*Late in life?*” Riker protested.

Beverly grinned down at him. “Well, describe the music for me. What song was playing?”

“Mood Indigo,” said Riker at once. He swallowed against a tight throat, his mouth suddenly dry. “It’s a jazz standard I’ve been working on with my band.”

“Alright. And when you practice, have you experienced any strange symptoms? Light-headedness, migraine, visual effects — like sunspots, for example, or warped vision? Possibly it could manifest as a ripple effect across the room?”

Riker shook his head. “Not when I’m practicing. Just today, on the bridge.”

Beverly thought it over. “Describe the sound quality for me. Was it playing on a speaker overhead, or a personal PADD?”

“Neither,” said Riker.

Beverly waited for him to explain. But the longer he sat in silence, the more Riker’s cheeks heated. He hadn’t realized until now that she thought he’d *really* heard the music, that something in the timbre or pitch had triggered a physiological reaction in his brain. But of course, he should have known. He could have kicked himself. Eyes closed, he forced himself to say,

“It was in my head.”

Beverly, with her impeccable bedside manner, took this in stride. Her voice was so gentle it hurt. “That’s not uncommon either, Will. It’s not *quite* so common as seizures caused by tangible music, but it’s not unheard of.”

Will nodded weakly, but he kept his eyes closed until the torturous heat in his face faded away. He probed the inside of his mouth with his tongue in the meantime, seeking out the sore spot where he’d bitten down on his bottom lip.

“Can you fix this?” he asked, voice tight, desperate to change the subject.

Beverly leaned closer, pulling his lip down a little to see. “Cellular regenerators aren’t great for mouth injuries. You’ll lose your sense of taste for at least a week.”

“It’s worth it,” he said. “I can’t play with a sore like this.”

With a hum of understanding, Beverly held his lip down, exposing his teeth, and blitzed the minor wound away with a beam of laser light. When she released him, Riker ran his tongue over it again: smooth and whole, pain-free.

“Thank you,” he said softly. He tried to sit up, his entire body protesting. “God…” he gritted out between clenched teeth.

“Take your time,” Beverly cautioned. “You might need help walking.”

“I got it.” He swung his legs over the side of the bed with effort, and then didn’t have the energy to stand. “Is it always this bad?” he asked.

Beverly's lips quirked. "I couldn't tell you. It's so rare to see a seizure at all outside of a recent brain surgery..." But her doctorly instincts kicked in and she quickly changed the subject before Riker could dwell on that information. "I'd like to start you on a regimen of quetiapine and neurocytamil. One will level out your hormones to prevent an adrenaline rush, which might lead to another seizure. The other will target your neural pathways, especially those involved with music—"

Riker made a strangled noise of protest. Beverly laid a hand on his arm.

"—*just* to make sure your wires aren't crossed somewhere," she assured him.

That mollified him. Barely. Riker lurched to his feet with Beverly's help, his thighs quaking before they settled under his control. He took a cautious step, flexed his fingers, and raised his arms as if he had a trombone held to his lips. Carefully, he stretched out his sore biceps by pretending to play the slide, a muffler in the bell. Beverly watched with her hands on her hips.

"Okay," said Riker, lowering the imaginary trombone.

"You don't think you should check if you can hold a phaser too, *Commander*?" Beverly asked. "Or is your trombone the only instrument you care about?"

He gave her a wounded look. "We're a scientific vessel, Doctor, not a warship," he said, earning a smile. It flickered, died, and he knew that if Deanna were here, Beverly would suggest he talk to her. But Deanna wasn't.

Riker looked away, to the door, to the bridge.

Would he hear the music again? Would he have another seizure, even after Beverly placed the hypospray against his throat and pulled the trigger? Cognitively, he felt fine. Better than fine. His thoughts ran smooth, well-greased; his eyes seemed sharper, picking up details he'd never noticed before — he'd always been a little near-sighted, bad enough to need yearly correction so he could keep up his piloting cert, but now that slight fuzziness seemed to fade away. And his ears were open, picking up footsteps down the hall, identifying the officers outside by their gait.

He tilted his head to the side for the hypospray. It pressed against his bare skin, the prongs cold and sharp. Beverly placed a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

Actually, Riker decided, wincing against the dispenser — he rather *hoped* he heard the music again. Mood Indigo. Just for the harmony, the tri-tone of three instruments playing in perfect accord.

He'd never heard the phantom player quite so clearly before.

There was no point in going back to his quarters. He'd been relieved from bridge duty for the day, but if Riker succumbed to the exhaustion pecking at his bones, he'd probably never roll out of bed again. Instead he paced Deck Six, from the hydroponics lab to the stellar cartography suite, and he did this over and over again until his knees stopped shaking and his legs felt more like working limbs and less like bags of sand.

Bags of sand filled with needles, he thought with a wince. *Needles held inside a flame until the metal turned red.*

No matter. After twelve rounds of Deck Six, he eased his way to the turbolift, one hand trailing on the wall. The turbolift dragged him down to engineering, where the halls were more crowded, but the screech of machinery somehow made you feel more alone. Riker grimaced a little — he hadn't taken his cochlear adjusters from his quarters this morning, so the whine of electronics and deep hum of the warp core were almost deafening. Across the room, Geordi waved to him and mouthed a greeting, maybe a question, but since Riker couldn't hear him, he just pulled a face and gestured vaguely to the Jeffries tubes.

Just taking a tour, he wanted to say. He leaned against the railing and peered into the electric blue of the warp core, hyper-conscious now of the paper-thin hospital robes Beverly had replicated for him. Eyes closed, the light of the warp core penetrated his eyelids: flashes of light-reddened skin, purple lightning, yellow sunspots crawling across the surface of his eyeballs and sinking into the optic nerve. Blinded, Riker listened to the drone of white noise.

The longer he listened, the more it seemed to have a rhythm.

Bzzzz, beat, bzzzz, beat, bzzzz—

Time Signature: 4/4, he thought. Eighty-eight beats per minute.

Bzzzz, beat, bzzzz, beat—

It hummed at a low G. He remembered an antique automobile exhibit his father had taken him to when he was a kid. Non-flying vehicles that Riker couldn't believe had ever been of any use in Alaskan weather. Six-cylinder engines, the rich warm harmonics of a Ferrari, the increasing friction of a crankshaft forming a C so high it pierced his ears when the Lamborghini was revved up. There was one V10 that sounded so good, with a high-pitched LFA scream, that he was certain the engineers must have tuned the exhaust just to boost the top harmonic and make that Lexus purr.

Riker could pick apart the warp core's hum in the same way, the pleasant chords, the harmonies, the rhythm sneaking in. It reminded him, actually, of the low drone-hum of Mood Indigo, when the trumpet, trombone, and clarinet all came together for that perfect-unison—

A human touch against his ear made Riker flinch, his shoulder jerking up. Something cold and hard was inserted into his ear canal, directly against the drum, and suddenly the warp core was off-kilter. He could hear the music in one ear, but in his left, where he'd been

touched, he heard only Barclay.

“Commander Riker?” Barclay said. He reached for Riker’s shoulder just as Riker jerked away, clasping one hand to his ear. “Sir, if you’re not in uniform, you’re — you’re not supposed to be in engineering.”

Riker was so focused on the uneven hum in his right ear, the devastating sound dampener in his left, that he almost didn’t hear. He looked down at himself belatedly.

“Of course,” he said, fighting to keep the embarrassment off his face. He straightened up slowly, his arms screaming in protest, and shook the lactic acid in his fingertips away. As he turned to leave, Barclay moved with him.

“Sir, I-I wanted to apologize,” said Barclay. His pale cheeks showed the type of blush that Riker had successfully fought down.

“Oh?” he said, still covering his right ear.

“For the band. Er, for everything.”

They exited into the hall, where the dull roar of machinery was blocked by soundproof walls. Riker dug the dampener out of his ear and squinted at Barclay, waiting for him to go on.

“It...” Barclay clasped his hands nervously. “It wasn’t like me, sir.”

Privately, Riker thought it was exactly like Barclay, but he accepted the excuse with a nod. “Commander La Forge tells me your performance has been excellent this week,” he said.

“Yes, sir.” Barclay’s tight features smoothed out in relief. “It’s been ... easier, sir.”

“Since talking to Counselor Troi?” Riker guessed.

“No, sir, I didn’t — I didn’t get the chance. She left so soon.” Barclay hesitated. “It just — when I quit, it just...” He blinked rapidly. “It just cleared up, sir.”

Riker nodded again, helplessly, and had taken a single step away when those words sank in. He studied Barclay closely.

“*What* cleared up?” he asked.

Barclay was silent for so long Riker didn’t think he’d answer. As he watched, Barclay half-turned to face the engineering doors. He raised one hand to his ear, touched the lobe, and let his hand fall, expression distant: fearful: wistful. All of the above.

“The music,” Barclay whispered. “It just went away.”

Riker’s heart pounded. When Barclay took a hesitant step toward engineering, Riker’s hand shot out and caught him by the arm, his grip like iron.

“Explain *exactly* what you mean,” Riker said, putting some steel in his voice.

Barclay stared down at the fingers around his biceps like they belonged to something toxic. “I just mean ... well, it sounds stupid, sir. But I couldn’t get that song out of my head.” When Riker just stared at him, unable to speak, Barclay’s face creased. “Mood Indigo, I think,” he said. “But it wasn’t *my* part. I don’t know whose part it was!”

Riker tightened his grip at the name and forced himself to let Barclay go.

“It was ... having an impact on my performance, sir,” said Barclay awkwardly. “I couldn’t sleep, and I had difficulty, er, keeping track of time. Telling time. Making calculations. It was like...” He curled his fingers up near his temples, shoulders hunched. “Like all the numbers had turned to musical notes inside my head.”

“Which notes?” Riker asked.

“I don’t know, sir. I couldn’t say.”

“Could you hum it?” Riker asked.

Barclay just shook his head.

“Did you ever *hear* the music?” Riker asked. “Not just inside your head, like when you practice a piece without your instrument, but all around you? Like there was a live band playing somewhere nearby?”

Barclay gave him a startled look. “No, sir.”

“What about sight-reading? Could you still practice the way you used to, or did the notes change around on you?”

Barclay hesitated. “I didn’t try,” he admitted. “If I wanted to practice, I just... I got all messed up. I played the wrong notes or got my fingering misplaced. I just...” He shrugged helplessly. “I just quit.”

Riker hesitated. “No seizures?” he asked.

“Sir?”

Riker shook his head. “Don’t worry about it.” He scrubbed a hand down the front of his hospital pajamas self-consciously. “Eventually, it faded, right? You got the song out of your head. You’re alright now.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sleeping okay? Eating okay?”

“Yes, sir.” Barclay searched Riker’s face and offered him an uncertain smile. “It was nothing to worry about, really,” he said. “It’s just an earworm.”

Just an earworm? The soundproof doors were closed, the warp core was inaudible, but Riker could still hear the beat.

He didn’t have time to change out of his uniform between alpha shift and band practice. Riker gathered his trombone from his quarters and ran right into Worf on his way out — the security officer had been dogging him ever since the seizure, so protective he scarcely let Riker go to the head on his own.

“Coming along?” Riker asked, testing his slide.

“If it is ... permissible,” said Worf. He eyed the trombone with obvious distaste, and Riker couldn’t resist blowing a quick cheeky F-natural at him.

“The guys will like that,” Riker said. “We never have an audience for practice.”

“I would not *wish* to have an audience for practice,” said Worf stolidly.

“Well, we’re performers, Worf, we *love* to have someone there to point and laugh when we fail. Otherwise we’d feel put-out.” He led Worf down the passageway to the practice room and checked his chrono. “You sure you can stand it?”

Worf’s only response was a growl. Riker searched his face to make sure he wasn’t putting on a brave face: he suspected jazz sounded as screechy and horrendous to Worf’s ears as the Klingon SusDeq sounded to Riker. But that had never stopped him from visiting the holodeck with Worf for a night of blood-stained Klingon opera, and it had never stopped Worf from attending the jazz band’s infrequent concerts. Impulsively, Riker drew closer to Worf and clapped a hand against his shoulder, resisting the urge to squeeze.

Worf side-eyed him. "Are you challenging me to battle?"

"...Maybe later," Riker said, quashing the rush of affection before it embarrassed Worf. He let go of his friend and pushed inside the practice room, grinning at his bandmates.

They’d already warmed up without him, as was their habit on mid-week practices. Riker found his music and thumbed through it while Worf took a seat. When he reached the standard Gates had bookmarked for him, he raised his eyebrow with a half-smile that looked more like a smirk.

“Midnight Sun?” he asked.

Gates tickled the keys in response. The smirk turned into a full grin as Riker studied the music and heard the old familiar tune unfold inside his head. He’d sung this to Deanna once, when they were young — in the jungle, during the spring, when the Betazoid flowers were still new and fragrant, and moonlight sparkled off the crystals in the grass. She’d asked him a million questions about where he came from, what his childhood was like, all delivered in a careful, stiff psychiatrist’s voice — a voice that fractured more and more the longer they talked, until it cracked, until her natural warmth and humor finally shined through. *What was Alaska like?* she asked him, and when he told her about the endless summers, eternal twilight, she’d given him that unimpressed look and said, *You’re lying!* Riker’s heart twisted as he hummed the opening measure and nodded to his band.

*Your lips were like a red and ruby chalice, warmer than the summer night
The clouds were like an alabaster palace rising to a snowy height.
Each star its own aurora borealis, suddenly you held me tight
I could see the Midnight Sun.*

Riker raised his trombone, his face strained. He met Worf’s eyes and saw a flicker of concern there: pupils sharp, nostrils flaring, like Worf smelled danger somehow. Riker attempted another quick smile, but he thought of Deanna at the conference and couldn’t quite manage it. If she were just here, if he could talk to her, there wouldn’t be any trouble at all — but maybe he could call her tonight via subspace — hear about her day, her presentation, her old friends—

Valenti plucked his bass, and everything went sour.

“Stop,” Riker said, lowering his trombone. The band played on for a moment, so he raised his voice, using the full weight of command. “Halt! Halt! Valenti—”

Valenti gave him a startled look.

“You’re half a tone flat,” Riker said patiently. “Didn’t you tune up?”

“Yes, I tuned up,” said Valenti in disbelief. “*Half* a tone, sir? Are you kidding me?”

Out of his periphery, Riker saw Gates and Morse reaching for their instruments, ready to start up again. He stopped them with an outstretched hand. “Val, just tune it up real quick.”

“Will, *no one* is gonna notice except for you.”

“I’m not the only guy on the Enterprise with perfect pitch,” said Riker patiently. “We’ve got more absolute-pitches than clarinetists. Just tune it. Start with G so you don’t get messed up.”

Valenti visibly resisted the urge to kick Riker’s music stand. He attached a digital tuner to his instrument and plucked the strings with a dark look. Normally, Riker wouldn’t have said anything. He could hear the half-tone, third-tone mistakes in any band, and it *could* be unpleasant — like a streak of neon green across a sunset — but he’d learned to live with it after making an obnoxious ass of himself in middle school band. Today, though, that half-tone dug into his teeth like needles and lit his nerve endings on fire.

When Val was ready, they started again. Midnight Sun, smooth and soulful. He could hear Ella Fitzgerald’s honeyed voice in his head, and soon it mixed with the memory of his own, husky and unsure, faltering every time Deanna looked him in his eyes, every time she smiled.

*I can't explain the silver rain that found me—or was that a moonlit veil?
The music of the universe around me, or was that a nightingale?
And then your arms miraculously found me, suddenly the sky turned pale,
I could see the Midnight Sun.*

The lyrics spooled out across the pleating of Riker’s brain. Liquid gold. Deanna’s hands stealing beneath his shirt, seeking out his body heat, fingers curling in his chest hair. Playing the right notes on his trombone, right now, was as simple as breathing. Natural as a heartbeat.

But Worf’s chair scraped across the floor in a high C. Riker closed his eyes.

A passing ensign opened the door — its hiss an E — and froze, muttered a “sorry”, and left with a squeak of his shoes. Riker focused on the music alone.

...Gates hit the wrong key.

“Okay,” said Riker, trying to keep his tone controlled even as he stopped the music. “Let’s try again from the top. Loosen up first, everybody. Do some stretches.”

They broke apart with a grumble. Riker circled the room, ignoring the daggers glared directly at his back, and checked on Worf.

“Alright?” he asked. “Can I get you some earplugs?”

“A warrior does not plug his ears,” said Worf stiffly.

“Really? Even when you visit engineering?”

Worf didn’t dignify this with a response.

“I would’ve thought a warrior’s ears were so sensitive that he *needed* earplugs,” said Riker mildly. “How do you hear your prey moving through the forest if you’re always down in engineering blowing your eardrums out?”

“By scent,” said Worf, and a slow grin spread across Riker’s face. He wandered back to the performance platform, where everyone had settled into position again, and picked up his trombone. He’d have to remember to tell Deanna that one, he thought.

He signaled the band to start.

And here it was: the melody, the rhythm, ice creeping over his ribs and fire following close behind, melting the stress of the day away. A phantom scent of Betazoid lilies and the sharp pungency of too-green algae in a too-blue pond, Deanna teasing him that it wouldn’t hurt to go for a swim — the water so cold it numbed his hips, but warm compared to the time he fell into Curtis Creek as a kid — the taste of her lips against his own, the metallic flavor of the water on his tongue when she tried to dunk him, when she smeared a handful of algae in his hair and he shouted in protest, grabbed her around the waist at the last second, before she could run away — and pulled her close to him—

—and kissed her—

—and—

*Was there such a night? It's a thrill I still don't quite believe
But after you were gone, there was still some stardust on my sleeve.*

And the melody to Midnight Sun collapsed, and the band fell away, and when Riker came to, his bandmates were silent, and Worf was staring at him, and he was playing Mood Indigo on his own.

He checked the time. Shipboard, it was 2200, right at the start of night cycle. But at Deanna’s conference it wasn’t yet noon. He crossed his fingers, hoped she had taken an early lunch, and made the call.

As if she sensed him, Deanna answered right away. Riker’s chest loosened at the sight of her, an easy smile tugging at his lips. She was seated outside, in a courtyard surrounded by centuries-old stone buildings, sunlight lending auburn streaks to her hair. Pulled back, but loose, curls framing her face — the way she wore it when they were young, when they got past the awkward get-to-know-you phase; when she could loosen up, drop her walls; when he could drop his easygoing persona and let her see the quiet self-sufficient kid he’d been

since Mom died when he was only three. Deanna caught his smile and gave him one of her own.

“Isn’t it a little late for you?” she teased.

“It’s only ten.” He leaned forward on his forearms, all his concerns suddenly forgotten. His lungs expanded, sucking in a deep breath, as if he’d had them in a vice until now and hadn’t even realized it. “What’s that behind you?” he asked.

She turned to look at the gnarled old fruit tree over her shoulder, and when she did, Riker got a heart-stopping glimpse of the pink flower petals that had tangled in her hair. As he watched, another dislodged from the tree and floated to the ground.

“It’s ... sort of like a *bivka* tree,” Deanna said. “You remember — the ones with the pink fruits in Mother’s courtyard?”

He remembered. Almost peach-like, sugary and sweet, they grew all over Betazed: fragrant flowers and sticky fruit juice, the crystalline taste of sugar on Deanna’s tongue. He waited for Deanna to face him again, admiring the curve of her cheekbones, the soft color of her lips. “You look happy,” he noted. “Can I assume the presentation went well?”

“Yes, you can,” she said, her smile spreading into a grin. “Don’t ask me what I said, though. The minute I got off-stage, I lost all memory of it!”

Riker swallowed a laugh. “Adrenaline crash, I bet. It happens to me every time.”

“Will Riker, first officer of the Enterprise, doesn’t like public speaking?”

“Too many things that can go wrong,” said Riker with a faux shudder. “Your notes could get out of order. Your mic could cut out. Maybe you start sweating buckets and nobody cares what you’re saying because you’re dripping all over the stage floor.”

“That sounds like a personal anecdote,” Deanna said, studying him with narrow eyes.

“Me? No way.” He held one hand up to God. “I just ... heard it from a friend.”

Deanna gave him one of her quick, affectionate looks, the one that always made his heart skip a beat. It usually signified she was about to change the subject, though, or that he’d gotten her off track. Lips pursed, she said, “I did make a fool of myself at the reception.”

“I have a hard time believing that,” said Riker sincerely, lowering his voice a little. “Maybe you *felt* like a fool, but I bet no one else saw you that way. What happened?”

“Oh, it’s silly. I got the Director of the University of Betazed mixed up with the psychology Dean. I called them both by the wrong names, verbally, and then kept getting it mixed up in my head. I’m sure they could tell, telepathically.”

“Well, you’ve met a lot of people there. That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Well, it is.” She bit the inside of her cheek. “The director is an old friend of my mother’s. The Dean is a former classmate of mine. An ex.”

“Oh.” Riker studied her face and saw genuine hints of anxiety in the stress lines at the corners of her eyes. He understood that feeling all too well; anytime he met old classmates from Valdez, including exes, he felt like he was staring at a stranger. And it was even worse when they remembered him, the bigshot Starfleet officer, and he couldn’t recall their names. He searched his memory for something to share, some way to comfort her.

“Did I ever tell you,” he asked, “about my first day on the U.S.S. Hood?”

Deanna sat back, one eyebrow raised.

“I was just promoted to lieutenant commander,” Riker said. “Transferring from the Potemkin as the new first officer. I transported to the Hood and no one in the transporter room greeted me! Thought that was really strange, but I wasn’t gonna say anything. So I start wandering the ship and I keep getting lost — the layout’s nothing like I expected, based on the blueprints — and it takes me forever to find the bridge. When I get there, some guy in a blue uniform asks me what the hell I think I’m doing on his bridge.

“I tell him, I’m the first officer! He says, Like hell you are. *I’m* the first officer.” Riker shrugged with a grin. “Turns out I had the wrong ship. The Hood had to come back and get me. So I was ten hours late to my first ship, and there’s a whole Gozanti-class cruiser out there that knows me as the stiff-shirt who boarded the wrong bus.”

Deanna was struggling not to laugh at him, which Riker felt was admirable, but as soon as he pulled a wounded face, she lost the battle. He drank in the sound of her laughter, the sight of her with her head tossed back, teeth flashing—

So far away.

As if she heard the sudden stab of pain in his chest, Deanna stopped laughing. She studied him closer now, gentler, and Riker could feel his poker face fracturing.

“Will...” said Deanna, concerned. That single syllable brought a hot flush to Riker’s cheeks. Heart pounding, he almost didn’t hear her ask, “What’s wrong? Why did you call me?”

“I...” His throat was tight. “I wanted to talk to you. That’s all.” He shrugged minutely. “When you’re onboard, we see each other every day.”

"I know. I miss you, too. But something's *wrong*," Deanna said. "I can sense it."

He shook his head, suddenly unable to speak. In the silence, Deanna probed his mind as much as she could from so far away.

"You're ... frightened?" she said softly.

Riker stared down at his hands, knotted together on the desktop.

"What's frightening you?" Deanna asked.

Her voice was gentle. Her dark eyes drew him in. Slowly, in a halting voice, Riker told her everything. The musical hallucinations — the high-jacking of his brain every night, earworms taking over the dictionary of themes — the seizure, and the long list of causes Beverly *hadn't* identified.

"You heard music?" Deanna asked.

"Yes. Right before the — the convulsions started." He swallowed reflexively, his tongue scraping over the smooth spot where Beverly had healed his lip.

"What kind of music?" Deanna asked.

"Jazz. The same earworm as before, Mood Indigo."

Deanna thought it over. Ignoring Riker for a second, she reached for her PADD and looked up the song. He stayed silent, his teeth clenched tight, as the song played over Deanna's speaker, tinny and distorted by the technology it filtered through.

"It's not very catchy," said Deanna doubtfully. Before Riker could get offended on Duke Ellington's behalf, she said, "I only mean an earworm is usually a jingle of some sort. It's designed to hook into a human's brain. They're..." She searched for the right word. "...addictive."

"A *human's* brain?" Riker asked. "What, are Betazoids immune?"

"One of many perks to being a superior race," said Deanna with a muted twinkle in her eye. She studied her PADD again. "Music is repetitive, and humans like repetitive things. It's a cycle of stimulus and reward again and again. Maybe you've become so addicted to this particular piece that you can think of nothing else."

Riker gave it some serious thought, his eyes strained. "Maybe," he allowed.

Deanna accepted this with a small nod. Glad that he'd considered it, that he would keep an open mind; he could tell, vaguely, the tenor of her emotions through their mental bond. But he wasn't prepared for her next question.

"Will, when you heard Mood Indigo before your seizure, was it the entire jazz band playing, or just one soloist?"

He opened his mouth to answer. But the answer didn't come. *Was* it a soloist? He tried to play the memory back, but it was impossible. His mind supplied the sheet music instead.

"It...it *couldn't* be a soloist," said Riker uncertainly. "There was a harmony."

"Okay. Which instruments were playing, then? Could you tell?"

He knew the answer intellectually. Trumpet, trombone, clarinet. But had that been what he heard? He skirted around the memory, and this time the coils of his brain unwound and he saw the music waiting for him, ready to be heard. All he had to do was dip his toes inside, let the memory wash over him.

But he couldn't. He swallowed again, blinking rapidly.

"There it is again," said Deanna softly. "That fear."

He closed his eyes.

"What are you afraid of, Will? What happens if you think about the memory?"

He imagined himself wading into it. The pool of remembered music was black and thick. Like ink. Like Armus, the formless tar-like creature that once killed Tasha Yar and sucked Riker into its pit, crawled up his skin, filled his lungs, suffocated him with a sense of evil so intense it paralyzed him, left him with nightmares for weeks. The music was different; it wasn't evil. But if he let it touch him, if he trailed his fingers through it, if he let it play a single note...

"I think it might consume me," he said.

He was sight-reading a new piece, Willow Weep For Me, when the music devolved. Riker followed the notation faithfully. But when his eyes saw a C, his fingers moved the wrong way on the slide; his lips played a G. When the tempo sped up, he slowed down. When he closed his eyes, he still saw the notation playing out over his eyelids.

The song coming out wasn't "Willow Weep For Me." It was Mood Indigo.

"Shit," Riker whispered, lowering his trombone. He kept his head down, his eyes closed, and tried to catch his breath. The slide pressed

against his stomach, cool and soothing. He didn't want to put it down, but he had to. He couldn't play again, only to listen to the music change like that.

"Lights," he said hoarsely, and the lights went out as he placed his trombone on the dresser. He felt his way to bed and all but collapsed into it, grateful for the darkness. Still woozy, like a brand-new player, he let his chest expand in long slow breaths, filling his lungs with oxygen.

Steady. Slow. Steady. Slow. 4:4, 88 RPM. The rhythm of Mood Indigo playing his lungs like a woodwind, like a horn. He made a conscious effort to alter his breathing pattern, to chase the rhythm away. What was that old blues lick his first-ever music teacher taught him? *Dir-ty, dir-ty, dog...dir-ty, dir-ty, dog...*

Sharp and loud and all too real, a trombone sounded next to Riker's ear. He bolted upright with a gasp and threw a right hook by instinct, expecting to catch an intruder in his bedroom. But there was no one there, and by the time he finished the swing, he could hear the trumpet and bass clarinet too, surrounding him: on his left, the trumpet, on his right, the trombone, to his front, the bass clarinet, and at his back—

At his back was playing—

Who? Who was behind him? What instrument were they playing? A cold sweat broke out over the back of Riker's neck, where he could feel the fourth player's breath against his skin. His back creaked in protest, arms locked up, entire body fighting to keep him still. But he forced himself to turn. He stared at the headboard behind him, at the grains of wood breaking into little threads, writhing like snakes as the wood unspooled into a thousand microscopic strings.

They bowed toward him. They wrapped around his fingers, crawled up his arms. The music swelled. And dimly, with a hand covered in strings but somehow capable of movement, Riker reached for his combadge.

"Beverly," he said faintly, "I think I'm having another seizure."

The music swallowed his voice whole.

"It is the second such anomaly that our sensors have picked up on," said a voice floating somewhere near Riker's feet. Dazed, he tried to peel his eyelids open, and thought he succeeded. But the blinding white light that he assumed was sickbay stayed the same, and it was only after three more furious attempts that he managed to open his eyes for real.

"And have you traced the cause?" asked Picard. Warily, Riker located him, a diminutive and blurry red figure at the side of Riker's biobed.

"Well, our instruments alone couldn't trace it," said Geordi — there, at the foot of the bed, next to a yellowish shadow that had to be Data. "But this isn't the first time we've picked up on something like this. The last instance was two weeks ago, when we were passing through the Ortan nebula. Just as we emerged and our sensors came back online, we got this signal."

The shadows danced around each other and merged into one amorphous being. Head pounding, Riker closed his eyes and tried not to faint. A gentle, cool hand landed on his forehead and he leaned into it with a grateful hum.

"He's awake," Beverly said.

"Later, Geordi," said Picard, handing Geordi's PADD back to him. He strode up to Riker's side and peered down at him. "Number One, how do you feel?"

Riker cracked open one eye and tried to find Geordi again. "What kind of signal?" he asked, his voice hoarse. He hoped Picard would forgive him for the disrespect — but he didn't have the energy for more than two sentences, and it was more important to find out what Data and Geordi had discovered than to tell the captain that he felt like shit.

It was Data who answered him. "The 'signal', so to speak, is more like an anomaly, sir. At the exact same millisecond, all shipboard sensors failed. In the next millisecond, all shipboard sensors came back online. They are functioning with flawless precision now."

"And ... the same thing happened before?"

"It's not just that," said Geordi grimly. "We passed through Ortan without incident. But the ships that followed us are starting to report strange things."

"Such as?" said Picard. He had subtly rested one hand near Riker's bare shoulder, and now, while no one was looking, he brushed one of his knuckles against Riker's skin. Between that simple touch and Beverly's hand on his forehead, Riker's headache almost washed away.

"Such as ... well ... one of the ships reported a strange smell," said Geordi awkwardly. "Their sensors failed, and everyone across the ship with working olfactory nerves said they smelled smoke and something chemical, maybe alcoholic in nature. Stringent."

"What else?"

"Another ship didn't experience any sensor issues, but located debris floating in the empty space around the nebula. It was all but incinerated by the warp engine, but when they examined it, the molecular makeup indicated it was man-made."

"Jettisoned from a ship, perhaps?" Picard suggested.

"Maybe," said Geordi doubtfully. "But none of the ships have reported dumping. In any case, the reports caught the interest of a civilian

scientist on Deep Space Four. He's got kind of a wacky theory."

"Oh?"

Geordi half-smiled, fidgeting with his PADD. "He thinks the hyperstrings holding the universe together opened up," he said, "and something — some entity — slipped out."

Silence. When Riker's heart rate spiked, everybody heard it. Beverly smoothed a hand down to his pulse point and counted down the seconds, one eye fixed to the medscanner. She modeled slow, calm breathing for Riker until he got his own lungs to comply.

"Number One?" asked Picard softly.

Riker shook his head. Unwilling to discuss it, he focused instead of moving his legs, checking that they still worked — that they weren't too sore. His toes shifted beneath the blankets and pointed toward Geordi. "Hyperstrings?" he asked, voice ragged.

"Specifically, a six-dimensional braneworld with infinite warped extra dimensions," said Data cheerfully. "I have constructed a model using a topological vortex with a negative cosmological constant. Such a braneworld may indeed 'open up' to an infinite number of points along the space-time volume contained therein."

Riker absorbed this, taking a deep breath through his nose, and forced himself to sit up. His muscles screamed in protest, but he made it mostly on his own, with Picard's hand between his shoulder blades and Beverly's on his arm.

"Another seizure?" he asked, adjusting the blanket over his waist.

"Yes," said Beverly softly. "It's a good thing you called so soon. No injuries this time."

He grunted in response and stopped checking himself over. His eyes slid sideways to study Picard's face.

"Am I grounded?" he asked, half-dreading the answer, half-resigned.

"Until we figure this out," said Picard firmly. He squeezed Riker's shoulder and nodded to Data, who leapt to the task of helping Riker out of bed. He could get his own feet under him just fine, but balance was an issue, at least for the first few steps — and Data's arm around his waist certainly helped. Riker did a slow, painful march around the biobed, and by the time he finished, Beverly had a shirt replicated and ready to go.

"Thanks," he said wearily. "Did anyone call Deanna?"

His shipmates looked at each other, faces blank. Picard raised an eyebrow.

"Should we have, Number One?"

Chagrined, Riker pulled the shirt over his head and hid a blush. "No," he said finally. "Sorry. Not thinking straight."

That earned him a quick head scan to make sure his cognitive functions were alright. Riker withstood it, too embarrassed to admit that for a moment, he'd thought Deanna was listed as his next-of-kin. He couldn't remember who was; certainly it wasn't his father. Most likely it was Mrs. Klein, the old baseball coach who let him list her address as his own when he joined the Academy. He didn't even know if she was still alive — and suddenly his eyes were burning, and he had to swallow hard against a wave of bile.

"Okay?" Beverly asked.

"Nauseous," Riker said. He accepted the resulting hypospray to the throat with a sigh. Eyes a little clearer now, he shrugged off Data's support with a muttered 'thank you' and straightened his clothes. "Feels like I'm wearing hospital pajamas more often than my uniform these days," he said. "At least this color brings out my eyes."

Geordi offered him a half-hearted smile. Data just cocked his head, eyebrows furrowed.

"Frankly, Will," said Beverly gently, "I think you look better in red."

Deep in the night, every muscle aching, Riker couldn't sleep.

He was exhausted; according to Beverly, this was common after a seizure. His eyelids were too heavy to stay open, his eyeballs itched, his stomach was pinched against his spine. But when he lay down, when he closed his eyes, all he heard was Mood Indigo, and if he thought about it too long, he could almost hear that phantom harmony breathing on his neck.

The clock above his door read 0500.

The clock above his door read 0446.

The clock above his door read 0613.

Riker swung his legs over the side of his bed and reached for his trombone. He called the sheet music up on his PADD and propped it against the wall, near his bedroom mirror. He plucked his mouthpiece out of the case and warmed up with it, just a light, easy buzzing of the lips against the rim. He played a quick glissando with the slide removed; a lip slur up and down the scale; and by the time ten minutes passed, his breathing was easy, his body relaxed. He could see his reflection in the mirror, shoulders loose and chest expanding as he readied for the first note of Mood Indigo.

He played. Just one instrument. Just his trombone, no harmony.

The notes came easy. The melody unwound. Eyelids at half-mast, Riker's reflection became a blur, a shadow: a doppelganger overlapping with his body, playing its own trombone. He half-smiled to himself and flubbed a note, but he kept playing, and as Mood Indigo unfolded, he was three years old again, struggling out of his snowsuit and crawling into Mom's sickbed, where she was poring through a selection of old jazz classics on her PADD.

How about some Little Walter? she asked him. *He plays the harmonica, just like you.*

Like me! He dug the old plastic harp out of his back pocket and curled against her, and only as an adult, really, did Will appreciate how patient she must have been, to let him blow away discordantly on that cheap toy, drowning out the music she relaxed to when she felt especially sick.

He played Mood Indigo, chest aching, and he was at Mom's funeral, peering at the members of her band, adults he'd only seen before when he was hiding under the card table inhaling their cigar smoke and untying their shoes. He was five years old, asking Dad to listen to him play the keyboard, to see if he'd sussed out Mom's favorite song — what song was that? He couldn't remember now — and Dad gave him a painful grin and said, *I don't know, kid. I've got a tin ear.*

He was nine, and he and Dad had been fighting all day, but now, on the long miserable trip back from Curtis Creek, with a fishing pole slung over Will's shoulder and tears drying on his cheeks, Dad pulled out Mom's old music chip, her favorite playlist, and slotted it into the PADD attached to his hip. He played it over the sound of the bubbling creek, over the soft hiss of falling snow. He played it over the message from Starfleet calling him away.

He played it every day for years, until the grooves wore thin and the data eroded and the chip couldn't be played at all.

Will started over, from the beginning, and played Mood Indigo smoother than his first attempt. His reflection stared back at him, affectionate and sleepy-eyed, a double-exposure lifting his trombone to its lips and playing a harmony so sweet it pushed into his chest, into his rib cage, and rooted in the soft organs there. His lungs, his heart, each breath a painful tug, a hint of strain.

Deanna, asking him to sing.

Deanna teasing him, pretending she didn't want to hear him play.

Deanna praising his 'clever lips' and testing his perfect pitch with a keyboard she didn't really know how to use, until both of them dissolved into laughter; Deanna singing along to his music, first deliberately off-key, to get a rise out of him; then softer, more self-conscious, her voice lovely and lilting and low...

Riker pulled back with a gasp, his face wet, his trombone lowered, but the music played on. It was a solo, *his* solo, but *he* wasn't playing. In his reflection, he could see the trombone still held to his lips even as he held it over his stomach, his hands at work on the muffler and slide even as he held them still, his cheeks hollowing out while in real life wasn't breathing at all. He touched his lips, confirming for himself that there was no mouthpiece there, that he wasn't playing. But he could *see* it, right there, in the mirror—

And when he looked down at his trombone, he could see the infinite microscopic strings that wove it together, too. They peeled apart from each other, then peeled apart again, each string devolving into a thread, each thread into a strand, a spiderweb of complex geometric patterns twisted together inside.

He dropped the trombone with a clang. The music stopped.

Breathing heavily, Riker checked his reflection. It moved when he moved; it blinked when he blinked; it stared back at him, wide-eyed and panting and scared out of its mind. Just like him. He let calmness wash over him, the same way it always did during away missions, and with steady fingers, he picked his trombone off the floor.

It was solid. No strings. No unraveling. Hesitantly, he played a G, a D, and checked the bell. Nothing.

His heart rate was just starting to slow when his communicator chimed.

"Commander," said Geordi's voice, "it happened again."

The sensors had gone out, just for a millisecond, at the exact moment that Riker's trombone collapsed into strings. He still couldn't bring himself to touch it, not after what he'd seen. He sat at his comm station instead, trying not to see his own reflection in the black screen, in case it started to move.

Deanna answered his call on the third buzz.

"I got your message," she said at once. "And one from Beverly, one from the captain, one from Worf — they're all very worried for y—"

"Don't say it," said Riker in a whisper, his face creased.

Deanna fell silent, biting her lip. Riker took a steadying breath and wiped his palms on his trousers. Mood Indigo, faint and repetitious, played in his ears.

"I have a favor to ask," said Riker slowly.

Deanna searched his face before she nodded.

“It might hurt,” Riker explained, his stomach twisting. “That’s why I’m asking as a favor. If you do this, you might be laid out all night with a migraine. I don’t know if you have plans—”

“No, Will,” said Deanna firmly, and Riker could tell through their link that she did — dinner with friends, he suspected — just like he could tell that she had canceled those plans with no hesitation at all. The twisting in his gut subsided a little.

“I need you to connect with me,” he said quietly. “With my mind. I know it’s long-distance...”

Deanna squared her shoulders. “I’ll see what I can do. But you have to reach for me, *Imzadi*.”

He nodded. His eyes slid closed. *Imzadi*. That word was all he needed — *beloved, my first* — and his heart expanded, warm and slow. His mind stretched out to reach hers, seeking out that golden light that he could always turn to, ever since he met her, after nightmares, on the longest hardest missions, when he was in sickbay or just bored to tears on the bridge...

Imzadi. There she was.

Deanna’s mind met his, a playful tickle of light across his skull. He let his breath out in a long, slow sigh. His memories poured into her and he was helpless to stop them, hadn’t realized how starved he was for conversation until now, how much he’d boxed into himself when Deanna left. There was no one else he wanted to talk to more, to tell about his day, to listen to her voice, to work through the problems of command together — her emotional deftness and empathy; his hard-line determination to do what needed to be done; her temper flashing, his playfulness soothing it away. The golden thread of her mind entwined with his, so tight he couldn’t tell them apart anymore.

And then, with a sharp inhalation, Deanna pulled away. Riker caught her clutching her temples when he opened his eyes.

“Deanna?” he asked, a spike of concern shooting through him.

“Just a headache, like you promised,” she said. But the lines on her face refused to smooth out. She met his gaze with something like concern, something that made Riker’s stomach drop.

“Did you see anything?” Will asked, his throat tight.

Her answer was barely audible. “Yes.” She switched to telepathy, her voice echoing inside his skull.

An intrusion, she said. A foreign element in your mind, your emotions.

A longing from outside of you.

A deep loneliness.

Someone whose mind aligns with yours. Someone who likes your sensitivity to music, who shares it. Someone who wants you to finish their song.

Someone desperate to go home.

Will closed his eyes.

The fourth harmonic, he said.

He’d been reserved, his first year on the Enterprise.

Easy with the smiles. With affection. Friendly with everyone he met — because as first officer, that was his job. But he made no friends. He held Deanna at arm’s length; he avoided the jazz band and made no mention of his musical history; he never asked to join a poker game or invited his fellow officers to his quarters. Only Wesley and Worf could be considered his friends, and even then, only because their ages and races formed a barrier so complete that neither encroached on Riker’s free time.

When had that changed?

Slowly. After his dad visited; after Beverly left, reconsidered, returned; after Deanna kissed him — gentle, sweet — and called him ‘Imzadi’ aloud, for everyone to hear, even if they remained only friends. And after Worf rolled his eyes at a joke instead of pretending not to hear; and Gates showed up at his quarters, shy back then, and said she’d heard he could play the trombone.

The self-imposed solitude was gone. No more holodeck bands or relationships. The stiff mask relaxed a little, until no one would think to call him ‘reserved’.

But the secret, desperate need to prove himself (so his mother would fight for another month of life; so his father would stay home instead of leaving; so his lovers would get sick of all his barriers, all his walls, and insist—) and the quiet thrum of caution, of worry, and the pervasive sense of inappropriate loneliness — all of that stayed.

It beat, eighth-notes and eighth-rests, just to the other side of his heart. It thrummed along his ribs and struck a legato on his lungs. It built, crescendo, all the way to the music room where his band was assembled, their faces pale and strained.

In quiet tones, Riker told them what was going on. The phantom player. The hyperstrings. Morse wiped the sweat from his forehead first, eyes going distant. Barclay lowered his head and fiddled with his clarinet’s reed, his face unreadable.

“Have you experienced this?” Riker asked in quiet desperation, glancing from one to the other. “Any of this?”

A muscle twitched in Morse’s cheek. He stared down at his shoes.

“Yes,” he said. “Two weeks ago. When we passed through the nebula. It must have been exactly when the sensors went out...”

“How long?” Riker asked.

Morse took a shallow breath and met his eyes. “Just until that night,” he said. His eyes flickered to Barclay. “I suggested Mood Indigo, you recruited Reg, and just like that, it was gone.”

“But until you suggested it...?”

“Until I suggested it, it was all I could hear.” He snapped his fingers to the beat. “Mood Indigo, nonstop, from one hour to the next.” He let his breath out in a sigh. “Damn sad song to have stuck in your head all day.”

“Lonely,” Barclay agreed, his voice small.

“And you?” said Riker. “When did it start for you?”

Barclay pursed his lips. “Right after you recruited me. And the moment you fired me, it was gone.”

So it jumped from one player to the next: trumpet, clarinet, trombone. Riker raised his eyebrows at Gates first, then Valenti, but both shook their heads. They hadn’t felt it. Hadn’t been compelled to feel it. He turned away from the band, biting his bottom lip.

“What do you think?” asked Morse softly.

Think? Riker’s head was spinning. He forced his thoughts into order, and when he answered, it was in the firm, confident voice of a commander.

“Our counselor believes it’s a foreign entity seeking out musically-sensitive brains,” he said.

“Makes sense it would settle on you,” Gates said. “Perfect pitch.”

He hitched one shoulder up to his ear with a grimace. “When I played,” he said slowly, unable to meet their eyes, “I saw my reflection playing with me. Creating a harmony. And my trombone unraveled into strings, just as the sensors went out.”

His bandmates exchanged glances, their faces guarded. It was Barclay who spoke first, stammering only a little, at the beginning.

“You — you think if we play it...?”

Riker’s heart leapt, the music inside him swelling: Yes, yes, YES! But he fought to keep his face blank, to give his bandmates no encouragement. He needed to hear their thoughts, uninfluenced. Pure.

“I think so,” Morse said when Riker stayed silent. “It’s worth a try, isn’t it? If it wants us to play it so badly—”

“Maybe that’s the key to going home,” Gates agreed.

“What if we’re wrong?” asked Riker, jumping into devil’s advocate. “Let’s say these strings unspool and pluck the Enterprise right out of time and space. We could wake up in a new universe. A new era.”

Val’s fingers twitched on his bass, creating a low, uneasy hum. Morse cleared his throat. Barclay firmed his lips.

“If we’re wrong, sir,” he said, “then a song is just a song.”

Riker searched the stone-cold faces around him, all set. Determination, trepidation, fierce courage and above all else, an eagerness to play.

“Jazz musicians,” said Riker with a sigh. “You never can resist a good improv session, can you?”

“It’s what we’re made for, sir,” Gates said. She stationed herself at the keyboard. “Now get ready.”

With his throat pinching shut and his nerves tingling into numbness, Riker took his place in front of the mic. He didn’t need the music; neither, he noted, did Morse or Barclay. They positioned themselves on either side of Riker, one grim-faced and the other trembling. When their breathing was steady, synced, Val began to pluck that string and Gates began to play.

And with the first low, solemn note, they welcomed the phantom player to the stand.

I always get that mood indigo...

Natural as breathing. Easy as life. Riker closed his eyes and breathed, just breathed, and the notes came out alright.

Since my baby said goodbye.

And in the evenin’ when the lights are low...

I’m so lonely I could cry.

Like his own voice, the bass clarinet dropped low to meet him. High trombone, low clarinet, and trumpet in the middle. Perfect harmony.

*'Cause there's nobody who cares about me,
I'm just a poor fool that's bluer than blue can be.
When I get that mood indigo,
I could lay me down and die.*

And there it was, so perfectly in tune, so expertly in step, that Riker almost didn't hear it humming along. He couldn't identify the instrument, but he could feel the vibration in his teeth — couldn't see the player, but he could feel the warmth and motion of a figure at his side. Morse gasped into his mouthpiece; Barclay's eyes flew open; but they played their notes without faltering.

They felt it too.

You ain't never been blue, no, no, no...

He closed his eyes. His chest swelled. The phantom player rose to meet him at his highest register, perfectly in sync.

You ain't never been blue...

Behind his eyelids, geometric patterns twisted in one themselves in intricate knots. They breathed as he breathed. They unspooled with every exhalation, every note. A migraine pounded in his skull; bright lights dashed across his corneas; any minute, he could feel it, a seizure would come on, and he just prayed he'd finish the song before he faded out.

*You ain't never been blue; no, no, no,
You ain't never been blue,
Till you've had that...*

The harmonic strings of the universe were gently stimulated, coaxed apart. The fourth harmony screeched, so high, so low, so everything, so everywhere, that it consumed the other instruments, the other players. A scent of cigar smoke and gin filled the room, a light chatter of familiar friendly voices welcoming a lost son to his true home.

And then it was gone.

The song played on, a little less warm, a little less vibrant, as the strings closed in again. When Riker opened his eyes, the world around him seemed a little colorless, the music a little flat. Back to normal, with the phantom player gone to its own time and place, where its own kind were waiting. Where it wouldn't feel alone. No geometric patterns unfolded in his skin. No strings unraveled in the brass of his trombone.

The music dwindled. Morse cut off early, curling in on himself like he'd been struck by a physical pain, his lips bared in a dry sob. Barclay collapsed into a crouch, head bowed against his clarinet, eyes squeezed shut. Alone, Riker played the final note.

...Till you've had that...!

...Mood indigo...!

"I like to think," said Riker seriously, "that the ghost of Duke Ellington possessed me."

"Your performance wasn't that good," Deanna assured him. She hooked her arm through his and steered him toward her office, the scent of real, non-recycled air and fresh flowers still clinging to her hair.

"You weren't here," Riker said. "Maybe it was the best performance of my life!"

Deanna made a noncommittal noise in her throat. "If there was a recording, I might believe you. But Geordi tells me the sensors failed, along with just about every other system — and the footage was conveniently wiped."

Riker gave her a mock-wounded look as they entered her office. It was good to have her back; the gentle teasing soothed the knot of worry in his rib cage, a thick tight ball of unease and misplaced sorrow that had been lodged in his lungs ever since the entity left. He massaged his chest as he sat down on the patient's coach, and tried not to look too grateful — too pleased — when Deanna sat down right beside him.

"Are you alright?" she asked, her voice softening.

Her thigh touched his. That human contact, that brush of body heat, put a lump in his throat.

"Fine," he said hoarsely. He opened up his mind to her, let her see: the odd grief, the dreams that had plagued him in the two days since the entity left. Dreams of his mother and her music chip; of Dad's log cabin standing empty; of Deanna's unread messages blinking on his PADD, waiting for him to meet her on Risa. He scrubbed his fingers through his hair with a sigh and Deanna leaned against him, one arm wrapping around his shoulders in a loose hug.

"Do you know why it chose you?" she asked.

Riker huffed. "Perfect pitch, Gates said."

"I don't think so."

When he tried to face her, she squeezed him tighter, so all he could see was her wild dark curls, and all he could think about was their video call, the pink petals in her hair. He closed his eyes, suddenly chilled and weary; suddenly needing her body heat more than ever.

“I think,” said Deanna softly, “it sensed something in you. Something that resonated with it more than any other heart it encountered. A true harmony to the sense of loneliness and longing that it felt.”

Eyes closed, Riker searched for her free hand. He clasped her fingers and squeezed lightly.

“Is that how you feel?” Deanna asked in a whisper.

He pictured, in his head, the sheet music for a song he knew by heart. Not “Mood Indigo.” Not “Quiet Nights” or “Willow Weep For Me”. He hummed a little of it and sensed the flicker of recognition in Deanna’s mind: surprise, warmth, affection, fierce and brilliant love.

“Midnight Sun,” Deanna said almost inaudibly, and she started to hum along. “Your song.”

“Our song,” Riker said with half a smile. He leaned closer to her, returning the hug with an arm slung around her waist.

“You didn’t answer me,” she said, her breath brushing against his lips.

“I didn’t?”

“No. I asked if that’s how you feel.”

He hesitated. His face creased with strain. But the longer he stared at her, the longer he held her and she held him, the more that agony softened, and the quieter the distant strains of Mood Indigo became. He leaned in, cupped her face, and captured her lips in a long, slow kiss.

“Maybe yesterday I did,” he said. “Maybe tomorrow I will.”

She kissed him back, his next words almost lost in her.

“But not right now.”

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