

Live

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Live

by [jamaharon](#)

Summary

Kyle Riker is accused of a terrible crime on Risa, and it's up to the crew of the Enterprise to figure out what he did.

And what he might have done, 30 years ago, to one of their own.

Notes

This is a remix of miloowen's amazing fic, [A Million Sherds](#). Milo's is Picard/Riker, and while I adore that pairing, I didn't feel my remix was different enough to justify writing it -- so I went with Deanna/Will instead. I'm a huge Imzadi shipper too, so it makes no difference to me, but if you prefer slash, miloowen's is there, it's massive, and it's actually finished!!

Another note: This was last year's NaNoWriMo project, and once it hit around 80K, I gave myself a "little break" to work on shorter fics. That little break just keeps going! lol I hope to finish this one by the end of this year.

Chapter 1

“Have you heard the scuttlebutt?”

They weren't talking to him, but Geordi kept his head down and his ears pricked. The folks in engineering often forgot he was their manager, not their friend, so their tongues got loose. He didn't mind most of the time, but if they crossed any lines, it was Geordi's job to set them straight.

“I've heard all kinds of scuttlebutt,” said Petty Officer Roe. “What've you heard?”

The first crewman lowered his voice. “About the XO's dad.”

Geordi's fingers went still on the keyboard. He turned his head slightly to take in the gossipers at hand, both of them so young that they should have been *significantly* more worried about being overheard by an officer. Gossip about Riker was common enough, but usually it centered around who'd been sharing his bed lately, not his family. And if Geordi knew Riker, he probably preferred it that way.

“I didn't hear anything,” said Roe. “Is he dead?”

“No,” said Petty Officer Xax. “I mean, he *will* be.” He didn't notice Geordi turning to face him fully. “He's been accused of—”

“Xax,” said Geordi sharply, and both petty officers jumped out of their skin. “Are you working, or are you talking?”

“Sir.” Xax turned back to his console, face flushing an ugly red. Roe looked properly scolded as well, so Geordi left it at that. He returned to his work automatically, but he couldn't concentrate on it. It was all muscle memory and instinct keeping him afloat while his chest tightened and his heart ran cold. So Kyle Riker had been accused of something, something bad enough to warrant a death penalty? Normally Geordi would dismiss it as wild rumor. But today, even though he'd *personally* heard nothing from command, he had a feeling it might be true.

Because their course had changed today — from the Neutral Zone to Risa — and it was quite possible these gossiping petty officers knew more than Geordi about why.

“Come in, Number One.”

The doors slid open and Riker stepped inside, standing with his hands folded behind his back until the doors hissed shut again and Picard nodded for him to come forward. Picard's eyes were on his padd, and when he finally looked up, Riker knew his first fleeting micro-expression would indicate the tone of this conversation — so he paid close attention.

And Picard's expression was pained.

“Sir,” said Riker, his heart sinking.

“Sit, Number One.”

Something terrible had happened. Riker sank into the nearest chair, not breathing. Someone had died. His poker face was firmly in place, his shoulders squared. Mentally, he ticked through the Enterprise's departments with a quickness that rivaled Data's computations; if anything had happened aboard his ship, it had been hidden from him somehow. So most likely, the issue lay outside: troubling orders from the admiralty, a new war brewing in Federation space, an old friend lost too soon ... the possibilities whirled in Riker's head, but he kept his back straight and his expression politely inquisitive, ready to listen. Across from him, Picard shifted uneasily in his seat and clasped his hands on the desk.

“As you know, we recently changed course,” he said, lowering his chin.

“To Risa,” said Riker. He'd practically felt his own face lighting up when he saw the orders, before confusion set in and his combadge beeped. Before Picard summoned him here.

“To Risa, yes.” Picard's chest expanded in a slow breath. He scraped his thumbnail over his own knuckles, head down.

“Sir,” said Riker firmly, because Picard wouldn't meet his eyes, “we're wasting valuable time. Whatever you need to tell me—”

“I won't tell you,” said Picard, his voice rough. “I'll show you.”

He pressed a button on his padd and turned it so Riker could see the screen.

His father's face stared back at him.

“Kyle Riker has been accused of the unspeakable.” Picard's voice trickled through Riker's skull and left his nerves prickling even as his face stayed frozen. “You may scroll through the news coverage yourself.”

With numb hands, Riker did exactly that. Every word he read made sense to him individually. But as a whole ... the letters stamped themselves onto his brain in whatever jumbled order they wanted, nonsensical and strange. He dragged his eyes down the entire story three times before he sat back in his seat, hyper-aware of Picard's stare burning into his head.

“What was he doing on Risa?” asked Riker finally. His gaze had drifted to a spot on the far wall and gotten stuck there. His voice was calm and dull.

“Is that your first question?” said Picard, head tilted to the side. His voice was so mild Riker couldn’t tell what he meant by that. Judgment? Concern?

Riker just waited for an answer.

“Your father was recently hired as a consultant in the Granicus system,” Picard said. “His role there was to monitor and potentially aid local strategy against Sindareen raiders. By all reports, the action went well for Starfleet. Your father was granted passage with his ship to its next stop-over — Risa — and from there, Kyle Riker would make his own way back to Earth.”

“Customary for consultants,” said Riker, his mind far away. “Most ships can’t alter their course just to deliver a single crewmember back home.”

“Number One,” said Picard gravely, “eyes on me.”

Slowly, Riker forced his gaze back to Picard. Normally he was quick to read people’s faces, but for a split second, he felt he was looking at an alien. Picard’s features were scrambled, incomprehensible. Then they resolved into a look of both reproval and concern. Alarm sizzled in Riker’s chest. He hadn’t realized how far away he went, and how quick.

“Sir,” said Riker.

“Thank you, Number One.” Picard swung his padd back around to stare at the screen. “Your father’s trial will start next week. Starfleet has ordered us to Risa to offer our full cooperation with the investigation, as representatives of the Federation.” His sharp eyes nailed Riker to the wall. “You may be called to testify.”

“On his behalf?” Riker asked. “Or against him?”

Picard searched his face. Riker stayed relaxed, confident there was nothing in his expression that Picard could read.

“I suppose that, Number One, is up to you,” said Picard.

It was a beautiful planet. Not as beautiful as Betazed — though of course Counselor Troi was biased — but when she felt the balmy air against her skin and smelled the fragrant sea, she understood the appeal. All around her a crowd of native Risians and tourists of all types milled together, sampling the finest silks and local delicacies at the market. Sharp-boned men and women leaned against the walls of their respective brothels, keeping their eyes sultry and their smiles appropriately beckoning in case one of the tourists glanced their way.

The mood was good. But Troi had been to Risa before, and she’d sensed better. Now, beneath the excitement and open pleasure, there was an undercurrent, a tension and anger that touched the minds of perhaps 70% of the people around her.

And all of it was directed at Starfleet. At Kyle Riker.

At the Federation consultant who raped a child.

Troi glanced sideways at Commander Riker. He was a good actor; anyone looking at him would see an average Starfleet tourist, curious about the local customs and eager to dive in, but too dignified, too reserved, to go chasing through the streets. He kept his head on a swivel, lingering to inhale the sizzling fish and vegetables at local food stands or returning courtesans’ stares with an impish smile of his own, just to see the false flirtatious look in their eyes give way to something genuine.

Was this a facade? Did he genuinely not care about the accusation? Troi tried once more to dip into his mind. He’d always given her blanket permission to do so in the past, but ever since he got the news, all Troi got was a blank stone wall. At the same time, she got the sense he was avoiding her. Avoiding everyone. In the evenings, you could still find him in Ten-Forward. He still socialized and played with his band. He greeted the crewmembers he passed in the corridors the same way he always did — asked after their families — casually touched their shoulders or the small of their back as he passed by. But his smile had changed, stretched too far, too wide. The twinkle in his eyes seemed artificial.

She couldn’t blame him. But she watched him closely as they passed another brothel, where a group of Risian boys played the local version of football in the streets. They were shirtless, their bodies lithe and tan, their teeth flashing white as they jostled each other. All of them were fine-boned, unblemished, pleasing to the eye — too pretty to be just ordinary children who didn’t know where they were playing. These were child prostitutes snatching a moment of fun in between clients.

And when Commander Riker glanced their way, his mask slipped. Not just the feigned curiosity or plastic smile. The walls that kept his mind closed off from her fell, too. A blast of emotion burst through, all of it so mixed up it would take Troi hours to pick through. She could practically see him boxing up the broken pieces of his skull, gluing them together until no more emotion leaked out, until the wall was back in place. The whole time, his expression never changed; it stayed in the strange blank weary state that it had settled into when he saw the boys at play.

Troi pushed a little closer to him and hooked her arm in his.

“It’ll be okay,” she murmured.

Riker didn’t say a word.

“Through here, sir.”

The security officers dwarfed Picard as they led him to the evidence room ... but he kept a close eye on them, on the subtle twitching of their

expressions, and got the sense that his natural authority made *them* feel small. That was for the best. Picard's talks with the local authorities had made it abundantly clear that Starfleet was not welcome on Risa, at least not among the government servants and law enforcement muscle who knew what Kyle Riker had done. It took all of Picard's menace and bluster to get his men into this room.

Most of the Enterprise's officers had been locked aboard the ship with strict orders not to step foot planet-side. Only two had accompanied Picard to the police station; Riker stayed close at Picard's side while Troi hung back, trying to fade into the background.

"Has he given any statement?" Picard asked.

"See for yourself." The security chief gestured for Picard to take his chair next to the holoscreens. He gave Riker a hard look, but let him pass, too; tense on the security officer's part, but Riker scarcely seemed to notice the threat. He floated through the room with soft curiosity on his face, detached enough that part of Picard wanted to pull him aside. But he had to assume this was a facade, that his first officer was simply conforming to Starfleet protocol: stay calm, stay dignified, stay rational.

Picard settled himself before the display screens. They were already lit up and ready to go, pre-loaded with footage from the Risians' investigation. Kyle Riker's face stood stagnant on one; a child's flickered on the other, cheeks swollen and eyes bruised.

"The child was not provided with medical treatment?" asked Picard, voice sharp.

"Of course he was," said the security chief. He paused. "After the evidence was gathered."

With a dark scowl, Picard navigated to Kyle Riker's statement and pressed play. The image unfroze. Kyle Riker's face creased in a perfect mimicry of pain — and was it ungenerous of Picard to think of it that way, as a mimicry? He watched with a hard glare as Kyle bowed his head and hid his face in his hands. There was no real tension in his hands: the knuckles, the bones, were all relaxed.

"So you admit to it?" said the security chief in the recording.

"I can't deny the physical facts," said Kyle, his voice rough. "But I— I don't know what came over me. I don't remember the details, you see..."

"You're claiming memory loss?"

"Not memory loss." Kyle raised his head, his face pinched. Tortured. "It was more comparable to a fog. Like...on Pillix..."

"Pillix," Picard repeated. He recognized the name. It was the planet where Kyle Riker had been stationed most recently; his consultation work had largely centered on Pillix, where the Federation's outreach had been delayed for decades due to dangerous solar winds. He hadn't heard of any accusations from Pillix.

"Has there been more than one incident?" Picard asked.

Beside him, Commander Riker stiffened, but Picard was so focused on the security chief, he didn't have time to check Riker's expression.

"There was an incident, in a manner of speaking," said the security chief. His lip curled. "But not with a child. Our intelligence tells us there was an internal report of sexual misconduct, with no charges leveled. Several members of a civilian team were affected."

"By...?"

The security chief leaned past Picard and scrubbed forward in the recording. Kyle Riker spoke again.

"It's called ... well, we called it Risa," he admitted. "An inside joke. Because we discovered it ... it lowers one's inhibitions. It throws its victims into this — this— insatiable lust. You can't stop yourself. You—"

"You deny responsibility?" the security chief asked sharply.

"No," said Kyle, and for a moment, he looked like he might cry. "No, but..."

Commander Riker turned away. Picard swiveled in his chair, lips parting — ready to call him back or dismiss him, whatever he needed — but then he saw that Riker was just studying the open files on the far counter, his expression closed-off and almost bored.

"Your evidence log says traces of alien powder were found on the accused's clothes," Riker said, reading from the files. "And his hands as well."

"That's correct." The security chief's face tightened. "And on the boy as well. On his lips." He glanced sideways at Picard. "His tongue."

"Does the powder work only by ingestion?" asked Picard.

"That's unclear."

"So he could have been drugged himself," Riker said neutrally, "or he could have used this powder to drug the child."

"That's our thinking as well ... sir."

Riker cast Picard a hooded look.

"Let's watch the rest of the statement," Picard suggested.

They watched in silence, and he knew Riker was busy analyzing his father's body language just as Picard was busy memorizing every word.

Neither of them flinched when the details got gory. They kept their expressions professionally calm, devoid of either judgment or sympathy. Because as surely as they were watching Kyle Riker, the security chief was watching them.

And then, when Kyle Riker's testimony was done, Picard switched over to the child's. He took a deep breath before pressing play.

"Start with your name," the security chief said.

The boy's face was working. Already, a tear slipped down his cheek. He stared not at the camera, as Kyle Riker had done, but at the floor.

"He called me Billy," he said.

Chapter 2

The crew was more subdued than usual. Troi could feel their anxieties swirling near the floor of every room, a thick fog of emotion that plucked at her calves as she walked by. They were concerned — angry — uncomfortable. And when this was over, many of them would ask to speak to her, and she would find herself in one awkward position after the next: defending Commander Riker from one person, helping them see that he was not his father; then firmly telling the next person that he was okay, that he wasn't the victim, either. And outside of those concerns, some irritating and some valid, she would have to navigate the Starfleet personnel who had suffered similar evils in their childhoods, or witnessed it in the lives of their best friends. It would be months of triage.

But all that would come later.

Tonight, after four long days of networking with the local law enforcement and lawyers, Troi met Picard and Riker in the captain's suite.

"Justice moves like a swift-footed beast on Risa," Picard said, pouring them each a cup of tea.

"Not swift enough," Riker muttered. He held his cup in his palms, letting it warm his skin, and when Troi tried to catch his eyes, he pretended not to notice. When Troi finally gave up, she caught Picard watching her, sympathetic, knowing.

"We spoke with Mr. Riker's legal representation today," Picard informed her. His aura pulsed with reassurance meant for her, while his words stayed utterly professional. "He was ... very honest with us."

Honest. And what precisely did he mean by that? Troi took a seat next to Riker, close enough that he could reach out and touch her if need be.

"Honest?" she said pointedly, and she said it to Will.

"He wants me to testify," Riker said.

She searched his face: dark eyes, expressionless features. If she didn't know him — if she were an outsider looking in — she would see a restless man, bored and eager to get out of here, to stretch his legs. Someone sick of bureaucracy and longing to sample the Risian nightlife, but not someone particularly troubled.

"What is the purpose?" she asked him carefully. "What does he expect your testimony to accomplish?"

Riker gave her a one-shouldered shrug. It was Picard who spoke for him.

"Commander Riker is expected to testify that he had a healthy, uneventful childhood," he said. "That his needs were met and he was never physically harmed. He is expected to address his abandonment and claim that his father had fully prepared him for independence, and that there was no need for a guardian by age thirteen. This will strengthen the defense's position that Mr. Riker is an unusual but upstanding member of society — a harmless, yet valuable member of the Federation who has never before harmed a child and whose most heinous actions can be logically explained away."

"Or," said Riker calmly, "I could testify that he *did* harm me. And he will spend the rest of his life in a Risian jail."

Silence. Picard's spoon clicked against his teacup. Gently, Troi let her mind brush against Riker's, a touch of warmth. An invitation. Something to coax him open and make his mind unfurl. She'd sensed, when they were young and in love on Betazed, that he was a man who valued control. When she learned about the tension with his father, that was what she chalked it up to. Both of them were sociable, headstrong, outgoing, sharp. Both of them were used to getting their way, to being in charge. It was natural they would clash, and clash early, especially with Will's mother dying so young. No buffer between them, no one to keep the peace.

But for Will to *lie*, to say his father had abused him when the stakes were so high, all because of petty teenage grudges ... that was unfathomably low. That was the action of a lesser man; it wasn't something she could imagine Will doing.

So Will *wasn't* doing it. Logically. When he casually suggested saying he'd been hurt, he wasn't saying, "I should lie on the stand." He was saying, "I should tell the truth." He seemed to expect them to take this half-revelation as casually as he'd dropped it.

They obliged.

"We asked Mr. Riker's lawyer," said Picard slowly, "what will happen if Mr. Riker is acquitted. The physical evidence is clear: Kyle Riker *did* violate this child. He will argue in court that the child is a trained prostitute. He will argue that he was under the influence of the alien powder he calls 'Risa.' And he will point to his stellar record with the Federation, and perhaps the testimony of his son."

Riker nodded, his face blank.

"And if he is acquitted," said Picard, "the boy will receive psychological help and resources, as well as a stipend from the Federation. And Kyle Riker, regardless of the verdict, will never be permitted near children again."

Troi breathed out a sigh of relief and sat back. By instinct she reached for Riker's hand, but her fingers no sooner brushed his than he moved away. Out of her reach.

“There’s one more potential complicating factor,” Picard said. “Have either of you heard of the Memory Pool of Gashak?”

Troi glanced at Riker, but he seemed to have permanently sunk into the glass-smooth mask of his poker face. “I’m not familiar with it, Captain,” she said. For both of them, really.

“It is something of a spiritual relic, seldom used for law enforcement,” said Picard. “But Mr. Riker’s counsel hopes it could come into play here. The pool, when activated, puts an individual’s memories on display.”

“And it’s not used for law enforcement?” asked Riker, his eyebrows knitting together.

“No.” A bitter smile twisted Picard’s lips. “One of the witnesses for the prosecution is a Federation psychologist, Dr. Elizabeth Lophtus. She will demonstrate precisely how fickle human memory can be. The Memory Pool does not show a factual record of events; it shows only what the subject currently remembers. And human beings, as Dr. Lophtus will testify, love nothing more than to edit and revise their own memories — to make themselves better. More rational. Less culpable.”

Riker’s face twisted in disdain.

“Your father, meanwhile, will use the pool to show *his* memory of events,” Picard said. “Which will no doubt demonstrate that these actions, for him, were just as torturous as they were for the boy.”

“Right,” said Riker flatly.

“And then,” said Picard, his eyes meeting Riker’s, “you will testify, Will. If you choose to.”

All eyes on him. The column of Riker’s throat shifted as he swallowed. He gave a single, careless nod, like they’d asked him if he wanted to meet for brunch.

He calls me Billy, said a voice in Troi’s head, and she was young again, in a warm river on Betazed with the sky a cottony mix of pink and blue above her, and she brushed the water out of her eyes and called to Riker on the river bank to meet her halfway. Something in her, some instinct, pushed her to use his first name for the first time. Not just his first name. A nickname, one she’d heard other humans use. And when she said it, her stomach inexplicably dropped, and he turned to look at her, stricken, as if she’d screamed at him to go away instead of just calling him closer.

Calling him ‘Billy.’

“You’ll testify?” asked Picard.

“I’ll testify.”

“And what will you say?” Troi asked. “Who will you testify *for*?”

No response.

Chapter 3

The courtroom was beautiful, like everything on Risa. Crystal cave walls arched in heat-carved loops over the crowd's heads, the smooth surface shining with a rainbow of reflected light. Outside, through glass-free windows, the sea rippled gently, the water turned a wine-purple color by the morning light. A breeze brought in the fragrance of summer flowers and street food, but even if she'd been led here unaware, even if no one told her where she was heading, Troi would know this was a courtroom. All around her, everyone she met, their stomachs were tied in knots.

Kyle Riker's team consisted of two Federation lawyers and one local counsel, a slim Risian with his hair dyed jet-black. He stood a head taller than Kyle, cancerously thin in his court robes, and his eyes were rheumy but his aura was needle-sharp. In the center of his legal team sat Kyle Riker, face set in a look of almost imperious boredom, not too different from the affectation Will had worn since the Enterprise arrived.

Two pits flanked the judge's chair. Witnesses for the defense and prosecution would take to either side. But in the center, in a lowered crater in the obsidian floor, there was a golden basin stained by years of use and filled with thick silver water. It would be cold to the touch, Troi guessed, and viscous but not unpleasant. Looking at it, she could almost taste the first meal she shared with Commander Riker and smell the flowers at her best friend Chandra's wedding, from the day she met him, the day he set eyes on her for the first time and unwittingly projected his infatuation and arousal to everyone in the room. This, then, must be the pool of memories. Even looking at it sent her rocketing back in time to more pleasant days.

Beside her, Riker was watching the Memory Pool too, and his face was creased.

"Headache," he whispered when he sensed she was watching him.

Troi nodded. They were in public, and not aboard the Enterprise, so it wouldn't be wise to take his hand. Instead she turned her attention to Kyle Riker, stretching out feelers for his emotions. He was as guarded as his son, without the benefit of Betazoid training. Beneath his tight veneer of control there was a swirl of negative emotion. Disdain. Impatience. Satisfaction.

Satisfaction?

Troi furrowed her eyebrows, trying to get a better hold on Kyle's emotions, but it was at that moment that the High Justice walked in. In the flurry of motion, as everyone rose and bowed their heads in deference, Troi lost her grip on Kyle's emotions entirely.

There was a rustle of clothing as the Justice took her seat. The rest of the courtroom followed. At Troi's side, Riker crossed and uncrossed his legs, unable to get comfortable on the cushioned bench. It had to be hell on his back, but Troi suspected he'd be uncomfortable here even if each witness was given the softest bed to lie flat on.

But there was no helping it now.

The trial had begun.

The child was like a ghost. He wasn't present, but he haunted the courtroom. His photos cycled across the viewscreens for everyone to see, and Troi found a stalactite to look at instead. The evidence found on his clothes and body was listed in dry detail while Troi focused only on the steady drip of cold water from the mineral deposit's tip. His testimony was read aloud by the security chief, his voice sometimes clinical, sometimes shaking. Sometimes Troi imagined the stalactite was shaking too, cracks appearing in its surface, ready to dislodge and shatter on the courtroom floor.

But the boy himself didn't take the stand. Only Kyle Riker did, a cosmopolitan gentleman in a suit and scarf. He folded his hands politely and sat up straight, his posture refined. When he introduced himself, his voice was low, rolling, pleasant, the type of voice that wouldn't be out of place in Betazed's royal halls, where aristocracy rubbed elbows with the finest and most cultured of the working class. Like a country lord retreating to his estate for a spot of hunting, Kyle Riker leaned into the microphone and greeted the Justice.

And he called the child a whore.

"He was a whore in the *strictest* intellectual sense," he said, his voice mild. "With so much training, he's probably more experienced than any adult in this room." At Picard's side, Commander Riker had started to sweat, his fingers twisted in the fabric of his trousers. "But experienced or not, he *is* a courtesan and by Risian law, the courtesan cannot be violated so long as he is paid."

"Payment does not cover damaged goods," said the prosecution levelly. "On Risa, our courtesans enjoy several protections not written into Earth laws. Damaging the boy ... that in itself is a violation. Turn your attention to the exhibit on display."

Picard lowered his eyes. He had already seen the photographic evidence of the child's injuries. He had no desire to see them again, especially not with the too-clinical voice of the law filling the courtroom air. But Riker lifted his chin and forced himself to look, his jaw tight and his hair glittering with sweat. On the stand, his father took a more leisurely glance at the screen.

His face creased. His proud posture fractured.

"Yes," said Kyle Riker, heavily now. Like the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

"You admit he is damaged?"

"Yes," said Kyle Riker, barely audible. "Of course. And I regret the damage, the entire encounter, more deeply than you can ever know." At Picard's side, Commander Riker let out a long, slow breath. "But a charge for damaged goods is very different from a charge of rape. And a

man under the influence of an unknown alien substance cannot be held responsible.”

Responsible, he said. Picard forced himself to stay calm.

Something told him this would be far from the most infuriating excuse he heard as the trial went on.

There were witnesses, of course, to testify to what Kyle Riker had done.

Normally demure, the Risian courtesans let their sultry personas drop. If it weren't for the circumstances that brought them here, Picard would find it fascinating to watch. While they waited to testify, the courtesans maintained their neutral facade. But when they took the stand, flashing eyes and brazen voices bounced off the beautiful cavern walls and echoed all around the audience, loud enough to pierce their eardrums.

They'd made it through three witnesses when Commander Riker stood. His tall form would have stood out anyway, even if no one knew who he was. The fourth witness's testimony continued as Riker pushed to the end of the row. With his head bowed and one hand pressed to his temple, he wove through the crowd and exited the courtroom.

He didn't come back for hours.

Troi went looking for him; Picard, eventually, took his turn, grateful to be away from the gruesome details and Kyle Riker's ceaseless justifications. He passed a severe-looking gaggle of paralegals organizing the state's evidence — bags of the alien powder known as Risa, sheets of medscans showing the exact effect this substance could have on both humans and Risians. Picard pushed past them to the low sea wall outside.

It was here, in an alcove cut into the cliff face by years of erosion, that he found his first officer. Riker sat with his chin resting on his knee, his legs pulled up to his chest. His face was peaceful. His eyes, dry and distant, were focused on the sea.

“It's almost time,” Picard informed him.

Riker's eyes crinkled. His lips twisted into a smile. “My fifteen minutes of fame,” he said.

The humor fell flat. Together they braved the crowd, back into the musical cavern where the accused waited. Picard had to pass the Memory Pool to take his seat, and as he glanced down into it, he noticed for the first time that the rainbow colors reflecting off the cave walls did not show on the silver water. Not in the slightest.

“Answer the question, Mr. Riker,” the prosecution was saying. Picard took his seat and cast a questioning glance at Troi; her eyes were tight. “If these medical reports do not indicate abuse, then what do they indicate?”

“They indicate a very rowdy child,” said Kyle Riker, his voice flat. Picard searched for the nearest viewscreen and raised his eyebrows. The medical report shown was several pages deep, but the few details he saw made it clear to him that this wasn't the Risian boy on display.

Providence Valdez Medical Center, Alaska. That was the hospital listed on these records. And the date ... William Riker would have been seven years old.

“A very rowdy child, indeed,” the prosecution said. He clicked through the medical file one page at a time. “Over the course of three years he suffered a broken collar bone... two broken ribs ... a severe head injury with skull fracture... a broken femur... multiple compound fractures to his hand...”

“My son was involved in baseball, anbo-jytsu, judo, Parrises Squares, and handball,” said Kyle Riker. “Outside of organized sports and martial arts he ran off excess energy by exploring the woods and mountains. Adventurous boys do tend to get hurt in Alaska, Mr. Inez. Are you familiar with Alaska? With Earth?”

“Is it common for Earth fathers to fracture their children's skulls?” asked the prosecution mildly.

Picard waited for an objection, but of course, there was none. Not in a Risian court.

“You accuse me of abuse,” said Kyle Riker, making himself comfortable in his seat. At Picard's side, Commander Riker crossed his arms and leaned back, making himself comfortable too. He looked for all the world like he was observing a tight poker game, searching the faces around him for tells. But not like he had any stake in the pot.

“I am accusing you of just that, Mr. Riker,” said the prosecution. “A history of abuse dating back thirty years. A pattern, in fact, of harming the children in your care.”

“I *disciplined* my son,” said Kyle steadily. “Discipline does not equal abuse.”

His eyes found Riker's in the audience and Picard glanced sideways, proud to see that Riker met his father's gaze without being intimidated.

“My son had many qualities that made me proud of him,” said Kyle. “He was a strong boy, good at sports, adequate at martial arts. He was intelligent enough to get into Starfleet. But he lacked *discipline*.”

“Clarify,” said the counsel as he paced before the bench.

“I will.” Kyle shifted in his seat. There was a dark, calculating expression on his face, one that Picard recognized all too well from other men. Diplomats trying to find a polite way to say what was inherently impolite. “My son, who as many of you know is in the audience today in support of me, was argumentative,” said Kyle. “It started when his mother died, maybe as an attention-seeking method. When two parents become one parent, there is inevitably a certain loss of attention for the child, and I believe Will felt that keenly. If he was in an accelerated

program at school, then he needed to argue about the curriculum. Why these classes? Wouldn't these courses suit his career path better? And if my son *wasn't* accelerated, then he needed to know why. He would argue over something as simple as what I served for lunch, what fishing gear was best, how to start a proper fire in the wood stove. Sometimes I believed he was arguing just for the sake of it."

The High Justice, to Picard's displeasure, made a note.

"In other ways, Will was simply ... a trying child," said Kyle. "He was confident. Confidence is good. But confidence in a child often leads to disrespect, not just of teachers, but of babysitters, elders in the village. His judo instructor. Once, I'm ashamed to say, he threw a temper tantrum at the dojo and physically assaulted his instructor. He was only eight at the time." Kyle met Will's eyes again, without expression. "Maybe younger."

"Why did he attack?" the counsel asked.

Kyle gave a muted little shrug. "He was asked to instruct the younger children. To help, rather than show off his advanced skills. He liked the limelight, like most children do, and he wanted things exactly how he wanted them, no compromise. A lot of children are like that, but William ... even up to age fifteen, he still threw tantrums when he didn't get his way."

Picard glanced sideways at Riker. There was no emotion on his face, only that steady, analytical look he sometimes got on the bridge. Eyes narrowed, head cocked, it was a look that gave away almost nothing. Picard tried to picture his first officer as a teenager, throwing fits. Then he wondered what Kyle Riker might consider a fit. An insubordinate tone, perhaps, or a rolling of the eyes, or...

Admittedly, he had seen the commander become violent. He had seen Riker's temper, his occasional sullen moods, and without knowledge of his childhood, Picard had seen nothing to worry about. It was possible, however tenuously, that he had been wrong. That those were symptoms of a defiant, arrogant mindset. That nothing Kyle Riker said was a lie.

Possible, certainly. But for every singular incident of anger from Riker, there were a thousand examples of his gentleness. Picard forced himself to turn his attention back to the accused.

"That personality type would make him difficult for any parent," Kyle said. "Imagine that burden transferred to a single father. And not only that, but a single father working for the Federation at odd hours, always pulled away from home. No doubt the majority of his temper issues came from me; he felt abandoned. But I did the best I could. I disciplined him, I ensured that he could live independently, and I filled our days together with adventures. Fishing and hiking, exploration. The sort of activity that sharpens a boy's mind and hones his skills, and keeps his interest at the same time."

"Did you ever hit him?" the counsel asked.

"I may have made some mistakes. In fact, I know I did. But I never abused him."

Again, he sought out Riker's eyes.

"I was grieving for my wife," Kyle said. "He was grieving for his mother. We did the best we could — and I never *ever* hurt my son."

The Memory Pool, when utilized, was as useless as Dr. Lophtus predicted. Kyle Riker's memory of his night with the Risian 'courtesan' aligned perfectly with his version of events. With the alien powder on his hands, his pupils dilated, his skin grew feverish, his body moved instinctively, out of his control, in search of heat, of friction. A haze descended over his mind, over the memories. Like a soul cut free at the root, he watched his body move without him.

He was helpless to stop himself.

And the child, despite his injuries, despite his obvious pain, was afflicted by the powder too, and never said no. He reciprocated; he instigated; he looked at Will Riker with love-glazed eyes.

The Memory Pool did not stop there. It cycled back over the years to William Riker's childhood, and the commander sat, stiff and still and expressionless, as a dozen petty half-forgotten arguments played out for the courtroom to see.

The child William Riker was tall for his age, athletic, charmingly handsome ... and ill-tempered, as his father said. In one memory, he studied the meal his father had prepared for him and refused to eat it. He demanded use of the kitchen, too young to reach the stove. And when Kyle Riker hauled him away from the hot surface, William bucked against his father's grasp and opened his mouth in a petulant scream.

In another memory, William stood in a white baseball uniform, his handsome features twisted in a scowl. He was a little older, perhaps eight, but when his teammate said something to him (the Memory Pool's words came out as gibberish, affected by Kyle's lack of knowledge or the erosion of time), William threw himself on the other boy, fists flying, bones snapping. The other boy came up with a broken nose.

And in the next scene, forbidden from playing baseball for his bad behavior, William batted his eyelashes at an elderly teacher and then played shy, showing her a bruise he'd given himself the night before. A younger Kyle Riker sat in the principal's office, his cheeks burning with embarrassment, and studied the unfamiliar bruises on his son's arms.

He was spoiled. He was angry. He was manipulative, reckless, and unwilling to take responsibility for his actions. Picard watched it all, his stomach tight. A sense of unease prickled the back of his neck. It was the most uncharitable picture he'd ever seen of William Riker ... and it was all just plausible enough that even Picard struggled to come up with an alternate explanation. These, he reminded himself, were memories viewed from the lens of a perpetually unimpressed father, a man desperate to justify his harsh punishments and eventual abandonment of his own son. Picard forced himself not to glance, even once, at his first officer.

The Memory Pool deactivated. Kyle Riker abdicated his witness stand.

There was, for a change, no official call for the next witness. Everyone knew whose name it would be, so while the prosecution shuffled their papers and the defense team whispered to Kyle, Will Riker stood — moving slowly, with his head held high, as a Starfleet officer should— and settled himself into the same seat his father had just vacated.

As a witness for the defense.

“Were you abused as a child?” the legal team asked him.

And, voice steady and calm, Riker said, “No.”

“Did your father ever hurt you in any way?”

“He disciplined me,” said Riker. He affected a smile and cast a glance toward the Memory Pool. “I rather think I deserved it, from time to time.”

To Picard’s horror, a chuckle spread through the audience. Clipped, brief, but unforgettable. The smile on Riker’s lips strengthened into a rictus, his eyes no longer shining.

“Did he abuse you sexually?” the legal team asked.

“No,” said Riker, letting the smile drop. His voice was firm. “Never.”

On Picard’s left side, Counselor Troi took a shallow, shuddering breath — almost a gasp — as if whatever she sensed in Riker’s mind had stabbed her. He must have heard her; sensed her; but he kept his calm gaze fixed to the lawyers.

And Troi started to cry.

Chapter 4

The verdict was better than Picard expected.

It was still, in Federation terms, “not proven.” Kyle Riker’s defense team had demonstrated rather capably that few men could resist the effects of that alien powder — now a classified and controlled substance, thanks to this case. And his time in the Federation had served him well, as had the Memory Pool and his son’s own testimony. But Kyle Riker was still an alien on Risa, and the boy he’d violated was a local, a respected courtesan. And a child. On Risa, that meant nothing when it came to sex, but when it came to violence, to rape...

“Not proven,” the Justice said. “And not innocent.”

So Kyle Riker would be held on Risa until he submitted to chemical castration. Until he could never rape again.

On Picard’s left-hand side, Troi’s eyes were burning, her jaw set. It didn’t take an empath to feel the angry satisfaction radiating from her now. But on Picard’s right-hand side, Riker was gazing out the window, his eyes distant and glazed as if he’d stopped paying attention hours ago.

Chemical castration.

At the defense table, Kyle Riker’s face flushed an ugly shade of red. Picard’s view of him was obscured as the High Justice rose and everyone in the courtroom followed suit. The Memory Pool whisked and whirled, silver fluid spilling over itself in a circle of its own accord, but showing nothing new.

And then they were dismissed, and they stepped out into the fading sunlight of Risa.

It was two long hours before they made their way back to the hotel. Commander Riker had stayed mostly mute during the debrief, keeping his arms crossed over his chest and an impressive glare on his face. It was enough to convince most bystanders that he was mentally present. In reality, he’d checked out, letting his captain handle the minutiae that would normally fall to a first officer ... and Picard neither rebuked him for it nor addressed it.

Now, as they walked together down the dark hall to their quarters, Riker automatically veered away from Picard and Troi, toward his own room.

“A moment, Number One,” Picard said. He reached out, half-expecting Riker to ignore him, but with surprising alertness, Riker turned on his heel and faced Picard. “I’d like to discuss this as a team,” Picard said, disturbed a little by Riker’s expressionless face. “Come.”

He ushered them both into his suite. It was comfortable: low, feather-stuffed cushions with silk covers and gauzy curtains over the window, blowing in the sea breeze. A glowing crystal lamp let off a tangle of warmth and filled the room with a fragrance not unlike a floral tea. Riker lowered himself onto one of the low cushions, his shoulders slumped and his dark eyes fixed on the crystal.

“Chemical castration,” he muttered. He made a huffing noise, but Picard couldn’t tell if it was a laugh or something else entirely. “He’ll never agree to that.”

“Then he will live the rest of his days in a Risian prison,” said Picard firmly.

“I only mean he’ll fight it,” said Riker, shaking off Picard’s words like an annoying gnat. “He’ll have his legal team ... not replaced, but replenished. New experts called in. And he’ll be out of here within six months.”

“He *wouldn’t* be,” said Troi, her voice puzzled but clear. The glow from the crystal lamp reflected off her dark eyes. “If you hadn’t testified for him, Will, he would have no case at all.”

Silence. Riker kept his gaze on the lamp.

“What could I have done?” he asked finally, voice soft. “Lie?”

“You *did* lie,” said Troi sharply. “I could feel your dishonesty, Will.”

Riker shook himself and met her gaze. “You felt nothing,” he said. “Deanna, I’ve known how to seal my mind off from yours since we were practically children. If you thought I was lying, it’s not because you sensed anything in me. It’s only because *you* wanted to see him hang so badly it colored your perception.”

“I wanted to see him hang?” Troi looked to Picard for help, but he’d frozen his face into neutral, too busy analyzing his first officer’s new, cold tone to assist Troi. Troi’s expression was tortured, her eyes wide and wet. She came to a decision and sank to her knees at Will’s side, shoulders squared. She’d made the decision to be gentle, to comfort him, and she looked somehow stronger for it, as she always did.

“Maybe I do want to see him hang,” she said. Her eyes glistened; her voice was thick with pain, with anger. “But only because I know what he did to you, Will.”

Riker’s jaw tightened.

“You don’t know a goddamn thing,” he said.

Geordi was always given the worst duties. On shore leave, as the head of engineering, and being so young and low-ranking among the officers,

it was his job to make sure the crewmen got back okay. That meant one long unpleasant shift taking names, checking on drunks, and chasing down the absentees. The Risa leave block was worse than usual, because it had been denied to all but a handful of crewmembers for so long. Confined to orbit, the Enterprise's crew had watched with concern as their top brass braved the angry crowd. Now, with the verdict in, they'd been granted only half a day of shore time, and most of them seemed too uneasy to enjoy it.

"Back early, huh?" said Geordi to an engineer.

"Not the best atmosphere," she said, her face creased. She glanced over her shoulder. "Excellent view for you, though," she said dryly.

Geordi's check-in booth was located directly opposite the security station. He waved the engineer away with a grimace. He tried not to glance across the street, really; it felt wrong somehow, to witness even through his VISOR what Riker's dad was going through, especially when he didn't know any of the trial details.

Across the street, the first rite of Risian justice was underway.

Kyle Riker stood in his civilian clothes, flanked by security officers, well-dressed and dignified despite the prison stamp on his cheek. To the Risians passing by, that stamp announced Kyle's status loud and clear. Whether the Federation agreed or not — whether he'd been acquitted or not — he was a rapist, and today was the day all of Risa would get to look the rapist in the eye.

Geordi, for the most part, kept his gaze averted. The details weren't available to off-worlders without clearance, and none of the top brass were talking. So maybe Kyle Riker had been falsely accused, like his son once was accused of murder. Maybe he was a victim of xenophobia, or an anti-Federation plot; maybe he deserved their sympathy during this act of humiliation.

But Geordi snuck a glance at him, at those cold eyes, and something deep inside him didn't believe it.

The hours trickled by. He nodded to Captain Picard before he beamed up. He passed fifty crewmen and their families through and sent six hopeless drunks straight to medbay. He gave a half-hearted scolding to a petty officer who hoped to bring a Risian girl back with him. And then, when almost everyone was accounted for, Geordi let his gaze drift ... and spotted Commander Riker making his way through the crowd.

Riker's head was on a slow swivel. He hadn't noticed Geordi yet. He surveyed the marketplace with glassy eyes; he moved like a sleepwalker, or like someone who hadn't rested in weeks, the kind of dreamy gait that made other people stumble out of his path and shoulder-check him, too busy to slow down or maneuver him out of their way. He walked past his own father without noticing. Kyle Riker's eyes flashed; he raised his chin; he didn't say a word, certainly didn't call out, but William Riker seemed to hear him anyway, because he stopped — slowly — and turned around to face his father.

"So this is goodbye," Kyle said. He looked Riker up and down, his expression unimpressed. Then, like it pained him to say it, "Your testimony was valuable to me, Will. You did the right thing."

"I know," said Riker faintly.

Kyle nodded to himself. He squared his shoulders and lifted his hands. A flexicable bound them together, so he couldn't extend his arms the way he wanted to, but it was clear what he was asking for.

"A proper goodbye," he said.

Riker hesitated. Internally, Geordi wanted to scream at him to walk away. To turn his back without a word and leave his father there, unacknowledged. But Riker stepped forward with his usual confident stride and did what his father wanted — he wrapped his arms around Kyle in a stiff hug, brief but tight. His hands clenched on Kyle's jacket before he pulled away.

"You did a good thing, son," said Kyle softly. "I'm proud of you."

Commander Riker just stared at the busy streets, his eyes hard and dry.

Chapter 5

There was someone in the guest suite who wasn't supposed to be there.

Barclay knew this because this was *his* guest suite — his secret safe space that he retreated to whenever work got overwhelming and he needed to — well, not cry, exactly, but not *not* cry. Anyway, it was a good place to lose one's dignity without anyone noticing or judging.

Usually.

Today, the guest suite was occupied. The door was closed; Barclay listened at the seam and caught a few muffled sounds — a deep, familiar voice groaning in pain, a creak of the mattress — and he flushed beet-red. Someone had stolen his hiding spot. And if they were anything like him, they weren't there for good reason. That groan ... was it possible someone had hurt himself in there? On the Enterprise? He didn't want to believe it, but when he turned on his heel to leave, something stopped him. Stomach tight, he made his decision.

"Computer," he said, turning to the black display panel on the wall. "Show me the occupants of Guest Suite Xeta."

"This guest suite is not reserved," said the computer's melodic voice.

He knew it. And inside, there was another soft moan. Images of blood and razor blades flashed through Barclay's head. "Computer, override guest suite lock!"

The doors slid open.

Barclay regretted his decision immediately. There was a slow rustle of bedsheets as the doors opened and bright lights spilled from the hallway to the room inside. Commander Riker sat up on his elbows, the blankets pooled around his hips. Beneath him, undressed and with a smile dying on her lips, was a woman Barclay only vaguely recognized — a visiting officer who'd joined them at Risa and was due to beam out as soon as the Enterprise got close enough to her space station.

"Sorry, sir," said Barclay with an ugly flush. He averted his gaze, but he didn't leave. Part of it was the shock — he'd been so certain someone was *hurt* in here. But part of it was a sense of unease. Everyone knew about Commander Riker's proclivities ... but his firm refusal to fraternize with the crew was well-known too. This woman represented a gray space — on their ship, but not *of* their ship — that previously, Commander Riker had never violated. Visiting officers were *his* officers. There was always a possibility, however faint, that the Enterprise could stumble into conflict on their way to drop this woman off, that Riker might be called upon to order her into danger, to risk her life. And if that happened, if his objectivity was compromised...

"Barclay," said Riker steadily. "Are you gonna stand there all afternoon?" A devilish grin spread across his face. "Or are you gonna join us? There's plenty of room in this bed."

Barclay stammered out an aghast refusal even as Riker's partner slapped him on the chest. The sound of Riker's laughter followed Barclay out as he retreated. In the corridor, with the doors closed behind him, Barclay crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the carpeted floor.

And stared.

And stared.

Finally, with a weak shake of the head, Barclay left the guest suite — and Riker — behind.

It was late, and Worf's eyes were itching as he made his way to his quarters. He heard, of course, the rapid footsteps behind him in the hall. A warrior is *always* on-guard. And he recognized, of course, the gait — because a warrior learns to memorize the sounds and habits of his allies as well as his enemies. So he knew it was Commander Riker jogging to catch him long before Riker raised his voice and called out,

"Worf!"

Worf was almost tired enough to pretend he didn't care. Riker would want to talk about Risa. Not the trial, but ... Troi's quiet plea for Worf to join them planetside, the strange quiet night he spent playing cards with Riker, the night they shared a bed together as brothers ... He took a deep breath and turned around to face Riker.

"Commander," he said neutrally as Riker caught up to him.

"Our session," Riker said. He adjusted his uniform jacket and looked at Worf expectantly. "Calisthenics?" Riker reminded him.

Worf furrowed his brow. It was an intimidating gesture — all his ridges wrinkling into one big knot. "Sir," he said, emphasis on *sir*, "we do not meet on the second and fourth days of the week."

"I know." Riker gave him one of those big, dazzling grins that humans considered charming. "I thought we could meet anyway. Blow off some steam."

Worf chewed on that, thinking back over his behavior today. Had he done something to necessitate 'blowing off steam'? Had he been especially — what was the word? — 'prickly'? Had he snapped more than usual? Been atypically aggressive? He didn't think so. If anything he had been more subdued, still recovering from the obnoxiously soft parade grounds of Risa. Maybe that was the issue. Perhaps Riker had noticed Worf's fatigue from all things beautiful and weak — and decided to cheer him up with an invigorating round of bloodthirsty battle between friends.

Or maybe it had more to do with Riker. But just like he'd shied away from Riker's emotional state when they were planetside, Worf shied away from it now.

"Come on," said Riker, like he could sense that Worf was considering it. He tugged playfully on Worf's arm and headed for the holodeck.

"We are not scheduled for today," Worf said, already following.

"That's okay. Nobody's got it booked. We can squeeze in for a quick round."

"How quick?" Worf asked.

Riker shot him a grin over his shoulder. "Fifteen minutes?"

Most humans wouldn't even last two, but Worf knew from experience that Riker could handle it. He gave a grave nod of assent and made his way down to the holodeck in silence. Riker bounded ahead of him, energetic and eager — as always — when it would be smarter to conserve his vigor for the fight ahead. Riker was so enthusiastic that he reached the turbolift a full forty seconds before Worf and had to hold the door.

"We could meet every fourth day too, if you want," Riker said when Worf joined him.

"Then you wish for a permanent change to our schedule?" asked Worf.

"If you don't mind. I mean, if you're busy..."

"I am," said Worf firmly.

Riker said nothing, and his expression stayed cheerful. He hit the button for the nearest holodeck and clasped his hands behind his back.

"It would damage you," said Worf reluctantly.

"You don't have to make excuses, Worf," said Riker, his voice light. "You're entitled to your free time. I'm just glad you said yes for today."

Worf accepted this with an uneasy nod. Still, he couldn't help the impression that Riker was hurt. There was no physical evidence of it. He was still smiling a little — and still had that anticipatory gleam in his eye — and as the turbolift whisked them horizontally to the holodeck, Riker kept up a steady stream of chatter. How was Alexander? Did he enjoy school? What was his favorite class?

"I remember that ceremonial pot he made you," Riker said. "Do you still have that?"

Worf huffed out a sigh. "The point of the ceremony, Commander, is to *destroy* the pot. Had I not smashed it, young Alexander would have been highly offended."

Riker laughed. The doors slid open and together they stepped into the holodeck programming room, where Riker's fingers danced leisurely over the computer in tune to some jazz melody only he could hear. He called up their usual program and gestured for Worf to lead the way.

"Did you ever make anything like that for your parents?" Riker asked.

Through the holodeck gate, Worf emerged into a fiery Klingon landscape. "Occasionally," he said, "I crafted coasters for their drinks. It was part of my elementary school programming. Arts and crafts." He wrinkled his nose. "They did *not* smash my gifts."

"Ah, parents," said Riker with a twinkle in his eye. He plucked a roll of tape from the equipment rack provided for them and wrapped his knuckles, jaw tight now, face expressionless. "I don't think I ever made anything like that," he said.

"No?"

Riker shrugged. He tossed the roll of tape to Worf, who cast it aside unused. "Not that I remember," said Riker, getting into the defense position, his hands up to guard his face. "Definitely not for my mother, unless you count artificial flower arrangements. You ready?"

Worf hesitated. The sense of unease was back. Instead of sliding into offense, he looked at Riker — *really* looked at him. The slight shadows beneath his eyes, the blankness of his face. Why was he doing this? He *liked* their sessions together, Worf was sure of it, but he'd never pushed for extra. Even Riker had trouble keeping up with their schedule as it was, and frankly had to push himself to finish on time. As a human, he could never get fully accustomed to Klingon calisthenics; certainly not enough to take on further strain.

So *why*? The question rattled around Worf's head unanswered. Slowly, he slid his feet into the offensive position and raised his hands. Riker flashed him a smile and an approving nod, and inexplicably Worf thought of Risa, of the trial — and remembered his own father's trial, the conflicted feelings that came with it, the uncertainty and pain. Worf squared his jaw and shoved those thoughts away.

"Ready," he said, and the fight began.

"What about a Samarian Sunset?"

"No," said Guinan.

"An Irish Raktagino!"

"I don't think so."

Wesley studied his notes. He'd scribbled down a dozen different drinks to try, and Guinan had shot each and every one of them out of the air.

She didn't stop him, though; a smile was playing over her lips and she was interested to hear what he'd come up with next. Finally, hopefully, he met her eyes.

"Plomeek tea?" he asked innocently.

Guinan pushed away from the bar with a chuckle. "I'll get you a Bloody Mary. *Virgin.*"

Wesley blushed a deep red and stammered, his eyes wide.

"The cocktail, not you," said Guinan, and he sagged in relief. Then he realized he wouldn't be getting any alcohol and his face creased.

"Oh, come on, Guinan!" he protested. "It's just plomeek tea!"

"Kid, for a boy your age, the concentration of aminatrox in the plomeek leaves would get you higher than— well, you don't need any more ideas," Guinan said. "And I know *you* know about plomeek, otherwise it wouldn't be on your list. Don't bullshit a bullshitter."

Despite himself, Wesley looked almost scandalized at the language. Guinan turned away to fix him a virgin cocktail and hide her chuckling. She mixed the tomato juice and sour Flemis sauce with an old Earth substance called 'Tabasco', not to be mistaken for the noxious substance outlawed centuries earlier (and sometimes still indulged in, when Orion cigars came through). A dash of black pepper and a squirt of citrus topped it all off. Not great without the vodka, Guinan thought, but it would do for Wesley.

"What are you doing in here, anyway?" she asked when she turned back. A tall, sweating glass of non-alcoholic tomato juice slid across the bar to brush Wesley's fingers. He looked down at it glumly and crumpled his list of cocktails into a ball. "Waiting for someone?" Guinan asked.

"Commander Riker," Wesley said. He took a sip of the Bloody Mary and made a face. "What's *in* this? Why is it so spicy?"

Guinan just chuckled. Across the bar, Commander Riker strode through the door and glanced around, raising an eyebrow when he spotted Wesley with a Bloody Mary in his hand. He approached with a faint smirk touching his lips.

"Do I have to write you up for drinking on duty, Ensign?" he asked.

Wesley, to his credit, didn't jump. He covered his drink with a coolly adult sniff and made room for Riker at the bar. "It's virgin," he said with great dignity, only blushing a little.

"I see." Riker managed to swallow his grin and met Guinan's eyes. "I'll take one, too."

"What's on the menu, Guinan?" Wesley asked as she prepared a second drink.

"You haven't eaten yet?" she asked. Riker was watching her line up the ingredients and she could see that he'd somehow miscalculated — he looked vaguely overwhelmed by the sheer amount of substances going into his glass.

"Neither of us have," said Wesley. "We've been on the bridge for twelve hours."

Oh, youth. To work a twelve-hour shift and then show up at Ten-Forward, bright and perky. Guinan shook her head and passed Riker his drink.

"I'll see what I can whip up," she said. In fact, she'd been preparing the spicy brine for hasperat for over a week now, and it was finally ready to go. She kept half an ear on Riker's conversation with Wesley as she prepared the wraps, each one eye-wateringly hot. She'd heard plenty of Riker's check-ups before, and this one was no different. He always started with a casual lead-in: questions about family and hobbies, little details tossed in to show that he remembered each individual and cared about their lives. He always knew who had a niece in the hospital or a special local custom to celebrate.

Then, masterfully, he guided Wesley to segue the conversation into work. None of Riker's conversation partners ever seemed to notice that he did this. If asked, they would probably say *they* were the ones who wanted to discuss work. One moment they'd be discussing music or sports and the next they'd be consumed by the desire to open up to him, to discuss their professional worries and seek advice. Really, Riker was an expert at maneuvering people; it was a combination of subtle leading statements and body language, and of course the relaxed atmosphere and the excellent food and drink.

"It's not that we don't get along," Wesley was saying as Guinan deposited a plate full of hasperat and Cardovian eggs at his elbow. She doled out soup and salad to both Wesley and Riker, but only Riker noticed and nodded at her. "I mean, we work together just fine on-shift," Wesley said. "But ... I just get the impression he doesn't like me. The other day, we both got called up to the bridge at the same time, and when the turbolift opened, he walked away so fast I had to *run* to keep up. It was like he didn't want to be seen with me."

Riker, seeing that Wesley was done, gestured for him to eat. "Ensign Mendillo is a fairly recent graduate, Wesley," he said, poking at his hasperat wrap with a fork. "It's not a lot of recent graduates who get stationed directly on the Enterprise. To get here, you have to be extremely talented, distinguished, and highly recommended. A personal commendation from a high-ranking officer is really the only way to get it."

"I know," said Wesley, his mouth full and his eyes already red-rimmed from the spice. "He *is* smart. And competent. It's an honor to work with him. But..."

"You misunderstand," said Riker gently. "I'm not admonishing you about a lack of respect, Wes. Just try to see it from his point of view. You're the only cadet from your class to nab the coveted opening on the U.S.S. Enterprise. It's a new ship, a chance to reinvent yourself. To prove your worth. And you know you don't have much experience, and you'll have to work hard to prove you belong here — but you have one advantage, right? The very fact that you got here so soon is an indicator of your skill. You're the *youngest officer aboard*. That alone

should prove that you belong here.”

Wesley’s brow furrowed as he realized where Riker was going. “Only he’s *not* the youngest officer,” he said.

“Exactly.” Riker had picked his hasperat apart, the doughy shell laid open to reveal pickled vegetables and rice inside. Still, he hadn’t taken a single bite. He stared down at the hasperat blankly and picked at his salad instead. “You get here and suddenly you find out there’s a kid who’s younger than you — smarter than you — already known and loved by everyone aboard. And worse, he’s been working on this ship the whole time you’ve been in the academy. That means he knows his way around, he’s got mission experience. He’s had two field promotions while you were struggling through orbital mechanics classes and early-morning PT.”

“So I’m a threat,” said Wesley glumly. He’d wolfed down all his food while Riker was talking and now he sat back, scraping his fork over an empty plate.

“He’ll get over it, Wes,” Riker promised. “All he needs is to settle into the ship. Make some friends. When he feels comfortable, he’ll relax around you.”

“I just hope it happens fast.”

“It will ... if you *make* it happen fast,” said Riker with a twinkle in his eye. “Invite him to the holodeck with you and your friends, Wes. Take him skiing. Get him one of these—” He picked up his Bloody Mary for the first time and sniffed it, his nose wrinkling. “—jeez, is this what the kids are drinking these days?”

“Guinan picked it.”

“Well, invite Ensign Mendillo and all your other friends ... and let Guinan pick something for *all* of you,” Riker said with a smile. “You and Mendillo might not ever be best friends, Wes, but the more people he meets, the more comfortable he becomes. And the more comfortable he becomes, the less he cares that he’s suddenly a small fish in a big pond. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Wesley, still staring at his plate. He took a deep breath. “Yeah. It makes sense. Thank you, Commander.”

Riker just shrugged, twisting his still-full plate in a circle. “You still hungry?”

Wesley’s eyes lit up. With a laugh, Riker pushed his plate over and stood. He nodded again at Guinan to thank her for the meal, the drink. But he left his Bloody Mary on the counter, dripping condensation, untouched. And he hadn’t eaten a single bite of his meal. He’d just pushed it around and waited till he found a chance to push it off on Wesley.

Grimly, Guinan watched him go.

There was something amiss with Commander Riker.

Data was an excellent analyst. He could often pinpoint symptoms of illness in his human comrades days or weeks before they noticed it themselves. They rarely appreciated Data saying anything, though, so he kept his mouth shut.

For Commander Riker, the symptoms could be illness or they could be something else. Mild exhaustion, Data surmised, or perhaps a simple touch of distractedness, which he’d learned could be caused by high emotions. With Commander Riker, these ‘high emotions’ usually centered around Counselor Troi. And Counselor Troi had seemed particularly withdrawn since they returned from Risa, so Data was comfortable chalking Riker’s oddities up to that.

The oddities themselves were small.

Stardate 44167.3. Commander Riker lapsed into silence while giving routine orders. His features, when checked, indicated no particular emotion. His eyes, as noted by Data, were somewhat glassy.

Stardate 44168.7. Commander Riker stepped over his chair from behind, as was his custom. Upon sitting, his left foot slipped out from under him. The manner in which he sat could best be described as ‘collapsing.’ He caught himself, chuckled slightly at his clumsiness, and sat up straight — or as straight as Commander Riker ever did.

Stardate 44169.2. Commander Riker was afflicted by faint discoloration, just beneath his lower eyelids. The hue was best described as a light purple, somewhat darker than lavender. When questioned, Commander Riker wiggled his eyebrows “devilishly” (to use Geordi’s term) and implied he had been up all night.

(Meaning: unknown. But several members of the bridge either scoffed or blushed, which Data took to indicate embarrassment.)

And now, Stardate 44170.6, as Data wound through the corridors of the Enterprise to his personal quarters, he discovered another oddity. Before him was a storage closet. Behind the storage closet door was a heat signature he recognized as Commander Riker’s.

Conclusion: Commander Riker was inside the storage closet.

Query: Why?

Data cocked his head and took a step closer. On occasion, he had seen humans knock their opponents unconscious, tie them up, and place them inside closets for storage. In fact, Lore had done this to him once, although rather than knock Data unconscious, he had simply switched Data off and removed his head. But Commander Riker’s life signs indicated he was wide awake, with an elevated heart rate and body temperature. He was standing upright, not sitting down, and his hands were free, not tied. Data could tell because Commander Riker’s hands were in motion, one over his chest, the other...

Data knocked on the closet door and inside, Commander Riker went still.

“Sir,” Data said, “I must inquire after your general health.”

“Data?” said Riker, his voice strangled.

“Your respiration is elevated to 25 RPM,” Data said, “and your resting heart rate has exceeded 110 beats per minute, indicating potential tachycardia.”

“I’m—” Riker huffed. Perhaps it was a laugh. “I’m fine, Data. I’m not in danger. Go away.”

Auditory evidence: Commander Riker was breathless. Visual evidence: Commander Riker’s heat signature was still elevated, and his hands were still moving at a slower pace, especially between his legs. The motion there was up and down on a short range of roughly 6.6 inches at a time.

“Sir, I insist you accompany me to medbay,” Data said.

“I’m not *sick*, Data,” Riker said. “I’m...”

He muttered a curse. Inside the closet there was a flurry of movement which Data would hesitantly label ‘exasperated.’ He cataloged a rustle of clothing, a clink of a belt buckle, and a quiet sigh before Riker opened the door. Here there was more visual evidence to analyze. Riker’s hair was disheveled and beaded with sweat. His cheeks were flushed. Olfactory data suggested he had been mating, but there was no one in the closet with him.

Surreptitiously, Data glanced between Riker’s legs for more evidence.

“Eyes up here,” said Riker drily. He put a hand between his legs to cover his erection and gave Data a baleful look. “Are you satisfied? Do you mind?”

“Of course I do not mind,” said Data, puzzled. “But Commander—”

“Can I get some privacy, then?” Riker asked.

Data hesitated. He considered saying nothing. But protocol won out.

“Sir, this is not an authorized location for ... self-pleasure,” he said, and even an android could sense the awkwardness in the air.

“I know,” said Riker patiently.

“A more appropriate location would be your own quarters,” said Data.

“I know, Data. I can’t go to my quarters. I’m on duty.”

“Then you should not be in the storage closet, either,” Data said, more puzzled than before. Riker glanced over Data’s shoulder, apparently to check that the hallway was still clear. He leaned on the doorframe and lowered his voice, eyes boring into Data’s.

“Five minutes,” said Riker softly.

Internally, Data’s systems whirred as he processed this.

“Are you...asking me for permission, sir?” he asked, genuinely unsure.

“I am asking you,” said Riker, his eyes closed, “for some alone time and some discretion. I will be back on the bridge in five minutes, okay? No one will notice I’m gone.”

“I noticed,” said Data, “and I am not even on-shift.”

Riker’s adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. He searched Data’s face: two expressionless men studying each other. Then, slowly, Riker removed his hand from between his legs and adjusted his uniform. His erection had flagged enough that it was no longer visible, and the flush on his cheeks had faded.

“Forget it,” he said, combing his fingers through his hair. He shook his head, and suddenly to Data he seemed pale and drained. “Don’t tell anyone you saw this, Data. That’s an order.”

But perhaps not a lawful one, Data thought. If a bridge officer was breaking regulations, particularly for something so minor, then it was Data’s responsibility to let the captain know. Geordi told him it was human prerogative to question orders. And Riker himself had counseled Data that as an officer he was expected — encouraged — to consider the dignity and, yes, discretion, of his men. Sometimes, Riker told him, rules could be bent to preserve a crewman’s health and comfort.

Was this one of those occasions? Data wasn’t sure. He was still trying to figure it out when Commander Riker nodded at him and headed to the bridge, his shoulders hunched.

So Data said nothing as Commander Riker walked away.

Chapter 6

As far as missions went, it was a light one. For his top officers, Picard suspected this would be a choice mental reprieve after the business on Risa. For the lower-ranking men, those who didn't understand the stakes on Risa, this would be yet another boring slog. But the Maeax had invited the Enterprise to observe their centennial Festival of the Flowers, a rite that had never been witnessed by anyone in the Federation before.

So of course, Picard accepted.

He checked his padd once more for a time estimate. Messages from subspace lit up the screen, and one from Risa caught his eye. Kyle Riker's first appeal had been denied and his legal team shuffled yet again. Not something Picard would forward on to Number One, he decided. He banished the message and called up the Maeax invitation instead.

Six guests were allowed. There would be no speaking - the Maeax had spurned universal translators decades earlier and showed no sign of changing their minds. Guests would be expected to participate in the ceremony's opening act by delivering wreaths to the emperor's young daughter. From there they would be cut loose for a night of lantern-lighting, boat-racing, games, and food.

Picard studied the details. He would send Riker, of course. And Troi as well; her empathic abilities would be put to good use on a planet with no verbal communication. Mr. Worf would not be a good fit for this delicate society, but Ensign Crusher was dying to get some planetside experience ... and he would be careful, this time, not to fall in any flower beds.

When he had his team of six assembled, Picard checked the time once more. He hit his communicator.

"Orders routed to Away Team," he said. "Away Team, report to the transport room."

A chorus of 'aye's rang out over comm and Picard returned to his padd. Lieutenant Essa of security, Ensign Peeler of the bridge rotation, and Science Officer Hlalat would be joining the Away Team. They would appreciate the opportunity to stretch their legs and prove their skill ... and he knew that Peeler missed the flower festivals of her hometown, because Riker had told him so; and that Hlalat's olfactory organs were 'bored' by the Enterprise's sterile air; and that Essa needed a few simple missions to recover from the nasty business he was involved in on Terris VI.

"Transport room to Captain Picard," said a voice from Picard's communicator.

"Picard here. Has the Away Team arrived?"

"Mostly, sir."

Picard raised an eyebrow. Delicately, he thumbed the communicator. "Mostly?" he repeated.

The voice that answered him this time was Counselor Troi's. "Captain, Commander Riker is ... a little late."

"But you've confirmed he's on his way?" Picard asked.

There was a split-second hesitation.

"He has not communicated with me," said Troi carefully.

Picard was under the distinct impression, sometimes, that they could read each other's thoughts. If even Troi didn't know why he was late...

"Computer, locate Commander Riker," Picard said.

The black display screens on his wall lit up with a map of the Enterprise. A red flag dropped down directly into...

"Sickbay?" Picard muttered to himself. He hit his communicator again, voice hard. "Picard to sickbay. Commander Riker, report."

There was a lengthy delay, then a burst of static.

"He's here, Captain," said Beverly. "Riker—"

Her voice wavered as she passed her communicator to Riker.

"Riker here."

"Commander," said Picard coolly, "do you pick and choose which orders to obey?"

"I'm fine, Captain, how are you?" said Riker with a smile in his voice.

"You're scheduled for the Away Team," said Picard impatiently. "Your personnel are assembled in the transporter room now. Waiting for *you*."

He caught the noise of items shuffling close to the speaker.

"I didn't get my orders, sir," said Riker apologetically. "I don't have my padd."

"Well, where is it?"

"Sir, I was off-duty," said Riker with just a hint of reproof in his voice. "My padd was in my quarters."

"And you were...?"

"In the holodeck," Beverly cut in disapprovingly. "Breaking his collarbone in three locations."

Picard stared uncomprehendingly at his padd.

"The holodeck...?" he repeated faintly. Then, with a burst of temper, "What the hell were you doing in the holodeck, to break your collarbone?"

"Mountain climbing, Captain," said Riker. It sounded like he was smiling. There was a new, sheepish undertone to his voice. "I had a spot of trouble with the ropes."

Picard closed his eyes and made a concerted effort to rein his temper in. There was no one to get angry *at*. Riker had a right to the holodeck in his off-hours; and accidents did happen there from time to time. He would simply have to replace Riker, and do it quickly, before the Away Team tipped over from 'on time' to 'insultingly late.'

"Heal quickly, Number One," Picard ordered, and he switched back to the Away Team before Riker could answer. "Proceed as-is, Away Team. Counselor Troi, you are in command of this expedition. Serve us well."

"Aye, Captain." She hesitated. "And Will—?"

"Picard out."

Riker was an excellent patient, even if his humor sometimes got a bit exasperating. Beverly always made sure not to show him how much she enjoyed having him in sickbay — it would just encourage him to get injured more. But she had to admit it was nice having him here. He wasn't the type to snap at medics or whine about treatment, and he had a knack for putting the other patients at ease — a bedside manner, so to speak.

"I'll let you win this time," he said to the sick teenager next to him.

"It's not *letting* me win," the teen responded, showing some fire for the first time since he was admitted. "I'm just better than you."

"Oho, is that what you think? Let's see who comes out on top!" Riker cracked his knuckles and, mindful of his healing collarbone, shuffled the deck of cards he kept on him at all times. Beverly kept a subtle eye on both of them, but when Riker bridged the cards and the teenager cried, "How did you do that?!" Beverly allowed herself to glance away.

"It's like this," Riker said as Beverly studied his file. "No, here, hold your hands ... yes."

There was a distinct noise of cards fluttering to the floor as the teenager lost control.

"I'm sorry," he said immediately.

"Don't worry about it." With a stifled groan, Riker swung his legs over the side of the bed and gathered up his spilled cards. He sensed Beverly's beady-eyed glare and shot her a winning smile as he stood back up. "No harm done, Doc."

"Back in bed, Mr. Riker."

He winked at her and Beverly, of course, pretended not to notice. While Riker showed the teenager once again how to shuffle the cards, Beverly scanned Riker's X-rays. She'd noticed this the last time he was in — the evidence of old breaks all over his body, none more severe than the spinal injury that had him uncomfortably shifting his weight even now. But she'd never stopped to give these injuries much thought. Tasha Yar was the same way. Her scans showed a body riddled with minor scars and old fractures. And the same was true for many of the aliens Beverly had treated aboard the Enterprise — people who grew up without cellular regeneration or modern 24th Century medical centers.

She'd hardly suspected that Commander Riker might be one of those people. Beverly tapped her fingers against the padd and studied the breaks closer.

"—there you go," Riker was saying. "Just hold your hands like that ... careful now..."

More cards sputtered to the floor.

"Will, where did you say you're from?" Beverly called over Riker's laughter. He glanced over his shoulder at her, then whipped his head back around and stopped the teenager from getting out of bed, one hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I got it," Riker told him. "You rest." Only when he was crouched on the floor and gathering the cards did he answer Beverly's question. "Alaska."

"I know. But where?"

"Oh, Valdez."

Beverly nodded and typed the name into her padd. She could feel Riker glancing her way, curious but too focused on the sick boy to question her. The record on Valdez was minimal. It was a tiny fishing port with no real hospital of its own. Lifespans and death rates were closer to

22nd Century standards than modern times. In photos of the city, Beverly was appalled to see a near-total lack of public transportation; private air-cars ruled the motorways and some of the roads were still carved from primitive concrete and tar.

No wonder, then. If Riker broke his collarbone in a town like that, he would have to wait for it to heal naturally. The best a child could get in Valdez would be a dermal regenerator six decades out of date and in dire need of repair.

Maybe those old breaks were part of the reason he got injured so much. Beverly worried at her bottom lip and was about to return to Riker's medical file when a commotion outside the sickbay door drew her attention.

Lieutenant Barclay wobbled inside, clutching a papercut on his hand that was currently spraying rivers of blood all over the floor.

"Barclay!" Beverly cried.

"It won't stop hemorrhaging," he said apologetically. Riker jumped to his feet and helped Beverly guide Barclay to the nearest cot. "It's that damn cocktail Guinan made for me," said Barclay, looking ill.

"A cocktail gave you a papercut?" asked Riker, biting back a smile.

"It's a blood-thinning cocktail," said Barclay woozily. "She said it would be like...like..."

He was too loopy to finish the sentence. By the time Beverly sealed his papercut and got Riker back into bed, she'd forgotten about the file entirely.

Riker's collarbone was declared fully healed at roughly the same time the Maeax Flower Festival turned deadly. He beamed down into a haze of fragrant smoke, and for a split second, he thought the Maeaxi people must be extremely small. Then his eyes caught up with his brain and he realized the crowd was on its knees, coughing and wheezing as the smoke infected their lungs.

Later, this is what his team would report:

Troi - "Commander Riker assessed and took immediate control of the situation. His first action was to secure a gas mask to the face of a nearby child."

Data - "Although I had analyzed the chemical makeup of the toxic plume myself, it was Commander Riker who developed and implemented Starfleet's countermeasures. Without his quick thinking, I have no doubt casualties would have numbered approximately 66.7% of all attendees."

Ensign Crusher - "If the gas didn't kill me then trying to keep up with Commander Riker probably would. I swear my lungs imploded on our way to the capital city. And then my legs dropped off immediately after, somewhere between Arcus and Mileux."

Science Officer Hlalat - "While our mission took an unexpected turn for the worse due to the militia's uprising, we nonetheless finished our clean-up ahead of schedule and with as few casualties as possible. I credit this early completion to Commander Riker's clear head and solid leadership."

Ensign Peeler - "I've never seen someone so energetic. You'd think he'd been waiting his entire life for a battle like this. He saved my life when the Maeaxi militia fired at me, and I'm not sure he even noticed."

And Lieutenant Essa, still troubled by his last disastrous mission, had this to say:

"Commander Riker's recklessness could have gotten himself or the rest of his Away Team killed at any minute. I am grateful for his quick thinking. I don't think he noticed the danger at all."

Indeed, Riker's image was broadcasted throughout the system on Maeaxi news coverage. In every video clip, as he pushed his team and tended to the wounded, as he stepped right into the path of danger ... he appeared to be smiling.

By the time the clean-up efforts finished, it was no longer an option to simply beam up. The Maeaxi had activated their magnetic shields, half-convinced the recent upheaval came from off-world. It went against all evidence, but Troi and Riker couldn't even argue the point without universal translators. They could only guess at what the Maeaxi thought and communicate their own needs with drawings and gestures.

This was how they got the shuttle.

"Beautiful," Riker declared from the cockpit. "Essa, take the copilot's chair."

"Aye, sir." Essa folded himself into the bucket seat. He was still a little green around the edges from the violence outside, but like any good security man, his hands were steady and his eyes were calm. He was well on his way to recovery, Troi thought; gradual exposure to chaos, like this, would help him forget his previous missions. Especially if he had reliable leadership such as Commander Riker to guide him through.

But was *Riker* okay?

Troi strapped herself into a shuttle seat between Peeler and Hlalat. Ever since Riker beamed down, Troi had sensed nothing but excitement from him. His adrenaline was infectious. He'd leaped straight into action as soon as his form resolved, and he hadn't slowed down since. Right now he was zipping around the shuttle, checking all systems with a faint smile on his lips and patches of sweat beneath his arms.

"He gives off a scent of danger, that one," Hlalat said as Riker returned to the cockpit.

“You read my mind,” Troi murmured.

She replayed the events in her head. The way Riker offered his own gas mask to a child without checking first if the air was breathable. Luckily for him, it was. For humans, at least. But then, not even a minute later, he’d grabbed a ceremonial staff off the ground and rushed straight into a knife fight with the insurrectionists. And Riker, unlike the insurrectionists, did not have a knife.

Troi had sensed no fear in him. He’d bared his teeth in a wide grin when they slashed at his stomach. She’d felt a soul-hammering exhilaration when he knocked them to the ground.

It was like he *wanted* to be in danger. Like he welcomed the opportunity for more pain.

Troi sighed. She lifted the safety harness off her shoulders and picked her way through to the pilot’s cabin.

“Can I talk to you?” she said to Will.

He kept his head down, eyes on the dashboard. His fingers darted over the keys. “We’re about to take off, Counselor,” he said. “Take a seat, please.”

He was back to ignoring her, then. Troi crossed her arms and considered staying here, just to bug him, but then the shuttle lurched off the ground and she changed her mind. In the cabin again, she crossed her arms and nailed her gaze to the cabin door.

It was a six-hour flight. He had to come out eventually, and she knew when he would do it. He would wait until the hard part was over — breaking through the magnetic shields and pushing upward through the atmosphere. Then, with the excitement gone, he would cede the controls to Essa and show his face.

And she was right.

“You’re cheating,” Ensign Peeler complained.

“I have innate biological advantages in this game,” said Hlalot apologetically. “I can see through the cards.”

“What?! And you didn’t tell me earlier?”

“It was ... entertaining...”

The cabin door slid open. Peeler’s outraged shouts covered up the pneumatic hiss. Commander Riker stepped through, fresh-faced and wide-eyed, already smiling at the commotion. He edged past them all to the bathroom, pretending he didn’t see Troi rising to follow him, or the way she opened her mouth to ask a question. By the time she reached him, he’d already locked the bathroom door.

“Damn it, Will,” Troi muttered.

She returned to her seat. Five minutes passed. Riker’s emotions were a dull background noise behind Peeler’s argument with Hlalot. Another five minutes ticked by and Troi sneaked a narrow-eyed look at the bathroom. He wasn’t making much effort to hide his emotions — which was normal for him, actually — but what was odd was that his emotions didn’t match his location at all. There was a telltale spark of pleasure, a rising crest of arousal, a hint of fatigue...

And then, as Troi sat red-faced in the shuttle, she felt Riker’s orgasm. He came silently over his own hand, locked in the shuttle bathroom. A minute or two passed while he presumably cleaned himself up, but he didn’t emerge.

Instead, the pleasure started again, more desperate and more muted. How could it be both? Troi didn’t know. She tuned in a little guiltily and felt his exhaustion as her own: weariness tinged with frustration, arousal tainted by self-loathing. And, as always with Riker, there was a hint of amusement, too, like his own tangled emotions made him laugh.

He masturbated three times, in rapid succession, and by the third orgasm, he wasn’t feeling anything but contempt. Troi sat with her fingers curled in her uniform trousers, her face a mask, and listened to the vactube flush and the hiss of sanitizer. When Riker emerged from the bathroom, still rubbing the sanitizer into his palms, he glanced around to check if anyone had noticed how long he was inside. Hlalot politely covered his nose and turned away, as if his sensitive olfactory nerves could still pick up the sharp stinging scent of arousal on Riker’s hands. Riker noticed, blushed a little, and glanced instinctively at Troi, half-smiling.

He met her eyes.

Briefly, the quiet, tired contempt inside him washed away. It was replaced with a jolt of surprise — a pleasantly neutral emotion — as he realized she’d been listening in. His mind brushed hers, then backed away fast, before she could reach out and link the two of them together. Mortification took the place of surprise. Despair welled up to meet it, so deafening that it felt like a wild beast howling in Troi’s ears. Then all the emotion faded away, tucked back where Troi couldn’t reach it. She and Riker stared at each other, minds closed off, faces blank.

He gave her a grin, quick and cheeky, and walked past her to re-take the pilot’s chair.

Chapter 7

The next injury was a broken wrist. Riker sat with his legs propped up on a pilfered sickbay chair, his forearm resting on his bent knees. There was no pain on his face, just a placid, patient mask — and he didn't complain or ask questions as Beverly double-checked his medical file and re-took his vitals. But his wrist was swollen, with broken knobs of bone pushing dangerously at the bruised skin. He was lucky to still have a *hand*, with a break that bad. With a shake of the head, Beverly studied the data coming in.

There wasn't too much to note, from a surface scan. Riker's weight was down and the medical tricorder showed a level of dehydration that concerned her, in a minor way. It could have been that this holodeck program was especially vigorous, and Riker had failed to drink anything beforehand. She shut the medical file down and handed him a glass of water, first and foremost.

"Drink that," she said, studying his wrist.

Riker obeyed. His parched lips took a moment too long to part over the rim of the glass, and he spilled a little water down his chest. He jerked his broken hand up to catch the excess, then winced in pain, head thrown back and shoulders tight.

"Maybe next time you just let it spill," Beverly suggested.

"Your wisdom overwhelms me," he said, eyes strained. He braced himself for the moment when Beverly set his broken bone. "And a touch so delicate it's like a butterfly's kiss," he said over the pop.

Beverly rolled her eyes. The hum of her regenerative scanner filled the room, knitting the fractured bone back together. She talked him through the PT movements and kept him in sickbay for an hour, just to make sure everything was working right.

By the time Riker ran through all his functionality tests, he hadn't taken more than a single sip of water.

The medical file was already open on Picard's padd when Beverly came in. She knew instantly that he was in a bad mood. His eyes got so stormy when he was upset that they looked pitch-black, and he had a way of angling his chin down, as if to protect his throat, that gave him away. Anger made him more compact, defensive.

"Come in, Doctor," he said, voice clipped. Beverly pushed her medical coat back and sat down with a sigh. Hands clasped on her knees, she leaned forward as if it would help her see the file; but really, she had it memorized by now.

"Four holodeck injuries in two months," Beverly recited. "The first time it was a multiple break to his collarbone. The second time, two broken ribs. The third time, a concussion..."

Picard huffed. Clearly he remembered that one, because he'd been the one to catch Riker on the way back to his quarters, blood streaming from the cut on his forehead and a flashy smile on his face. Treatment for concussions was tricky, more complex than a broken bone. For a day or two afterward, Riker had mildly confused left vs. right and affirmative vs. negative, and it had been both concerning and entertaining to hear him befuddling Data on the bridge.

"And this time," said Beverly, "it's a broken wrist."

"We haven't had this many holodeck injuries since the crewmen discovered Klingon calisthenics," Picard said. "And even then, no one went back for a second round."

"No one except Will," Beverly pointed out.

"That's different. He's never been seriously injured in his sessions with Worf. And *he* was the one who implemented safety measures for the rest of the crew. This..." Picard pursed his lips and in an instant, Beverly knew what he was considering — and what he would decide. She held her breath, stomach tight.

It wasn't right. Well, it went against her values, at least. But maybe it *was* the right thing to do, in this specific instance. Every crewman was entitled to his privacy in the holodeck, but when that privacy became a safety issue — and it clearly had—

"Computer," said Picard, his shoulders sagging in a sigh. "Show me Commander Riker's holodeck programs."

"*Privacy protocols—*"

"Override."

Quietly, Beverly crossed behind Picard's desk so she could see his padd. She watched over his shoulder as Riker's file loaded.

"What has he claimed to be doing?" Picard asked. A laundry list of programs popped up without detail.

"Extreme sports," Beverly said. "Martial arts. Standard adventures and explorations."

Picard clicked on each of the programs in turn. They expanded into detailed menus. The first — camping in the Sadhara Jungle — featured a promenade of dangerous snakes, insects, and large predators to watch out for — torrential rains and mudslides and floods — volcanos to climb and faulty equipment to problem-solve around. This ranged from broken water filters to reversed compasses, frayed backpack straps to collapsing tents.

"He programmed *faulty equipment*?" said Beverly, her voice thick with disbelief.

"With the computer set to randomly assign faults," Picard noted, "such that he could never know which item will fail, or when. He must have ordered the computer to generate this list; it's thousands deep. It would be ... highly difficult to memorize and anticipate every potential risk."

He met her eyes.

"If he even tried," Picard said.

Beverly swallowed. She leaned over the padd, noting a date not too long ago.

"This must be where he had his mountain climbing accident," she said with a tap of the screen. "He blamed the ropes."

And he hadn't been lying. The computer played back the footage for them. Riker had secured his ropes, double-checked his knot, and started his ascent carefully. But the computer ensured that the ropes snapped nonetheless, and he crashed chest-first against the cliff face with a crunch of bone and a muffled shout. When momentum swung him back, bloodied and bruised, Riker just gritted his teeth, grabbed the single remaining rope, and started his descent — cool and calm, clear-headed despite the pain.

"Next session," Picard said.

There were skipper races with pre-programmed and excessively dangerous courses: narrow tunnels, craters to skim the rim of every hull, uneven rock formations to duck through, even alien creatures designed to lurch into the vehicle's path. The other programs were more familiar to Picard, and more bloody. Some were 'simple' battle simulations: hand to hand combat with enemies of Riker's own choosing. Martial arts competitions where there was simply no chance for a real human being to win against the simulation. Skiing, obstacle courses, smoke-choked rescue missions in a crashed shuttle, survival scenarios in every climate...

"He's running himself ragged," Picard said, and Beverly couldn't tell if he sounded more grim or amazed. "It's astonishing he can function on the bridge."

"Well, he spaces them out," Beverly said doubtfully. "And look at his history. He's been doing this for a long time. Once a week, every week, the entire time he's been aboard."

Picard grunted, but he clearly heard the unspoken message: Beverly 100% agreed. At this rate, even with rest periods and the holodeck's busy reservation schedule, Riker was heading straight for a medical collapse.

"Jean-Luc..." Beverly started.

"I know, Doctor," he said, his face dark. He was already reaching for his communicator. "Commander Riker, to my ready room."

"Do you want me here?" Beverly asked softly, touching his shoulder. She was always startled by the firmness of his muscles beneath the uniform, the warmth of his body. Somewhere along the way, since Jack died, she'd stopped thinking of him as a solid human being, someone she could touch. Picard glanced around his ready room as if imagining Riker here and sighed again.

"It will embarrass him to have a witness," he said reluctantly. "But ... the additional authority may just impress upon Will that this really is a serious matter."

"I'll stay."

He nodded. While he studied the holodeck programs, Beverly settled into silence, thinking of her own padd — the medical files there. Once, when she first treated Riker for a minor injury — long before either of them were stationed on the Enterprise — she'd raised her eyebrows at his spinal injury. It was a C5, nasty enough to paralyze not just his legs but his wrists and hands too; he would have been able to bend his elbows and raise his arms, but that was about the extent of it. She glanced from the scan to Riker and raised her eyebrows, flipping the diagram around so he could see.

"This looks nasty," she said, and Riker smiled at once. "What happened?"

"You ever participate in anbo-jyutsu?" he asked.

"Not really. I've seen a match before. My husband took it up ... for about a month, and he showed me the Ka."

Riker chuckled at that and then put on a fierce expression, like an old-fashioned samurai. He moved his hands in the sweeping, regal gesture of Ka-One, just goofing around ... until his shoulder twinged and he let his hands fall with a wince.

"I was injured in a match," he said, explaining the old injury. No pain in his voice. Just soft, self-deprecating humor. "Thought I could throw my opponent ... only he was about fifty kilos heavier than me, and he didn't like being thrown. He slammed me into the mat so hard I heard something crack and..."

A spinal injury this bad would have left him in a wheelchair for life, once upon a time. Nowadays, it should have been fully healed: no sign of it on the scanners, no pain leftover in Riker's body. But obviously, that wasn't the case. The way he held himself, whether upright or sitting down, spoke volumes.

"How old were you?" Beverly asked.

Riker scrunched his nose. "Uh ... eleven or twelve, I guess."

"Eleven?" Beverly nearly dropped her padd. "William Riker, who the hell allowed an *eleven-year-old* to compete in anbo-jyutsu? You're lucky to be alive!"

And he laughed, and in the middle of all their banter, Beverly forgot to ask the most important question ... why hadn't his spinal injury been properly healed? The only reason she could think of was that he didn't get *any* medical attention for at least one full day. Even the best cellular regenerators lost a lot of oomph when the injury was old, and twenty-four hours could make one hell of a difference. But if he'd been a child ... what parent would see their child paralyzed and *not* rush them to the hospital? Why hadn't his opponent, or the spectators, called for help?

The door to Picard's office slid open. Beverly pushed her thoughts aside.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" said Riker, going to parade rest just inside the door.

"Sit," said Picard. He'd washed most of the anger from his face, but there was still a distinct testy edge to that single word.

Riker took a seat at Beverly's side. She watched the way he leaned forward to get comfortable — that old ache in his spine. At the desk, Picard squared his shoulders and flipped his padd around.

Riker read the list of programs and his neutral expression flickered. Whatever he felt, he masked it with a sheepish smile.

"I suppose this is the part where you tell me to take a break," he said.

"It most certainly is," said Beverly with her best waspish doctor's voice. "In two months, you've piled up more holodeck injuries than anyone else has in a decade!"

"You seem to have designed yourself a program list, Will, that is *custom-built* to induce fatigue," Picard said. He, like Beverly, had opted for a strict tone, becoming the stern Captain who always seemed to catch Wesley during his Dumb Teenager moments. "I can't have my first officer in the sickbay every time an away mission comes up. And I can't have him collapsing on the bridge, either."

Riker actually looked mildly offended at that. "I like to blow off steam, sir," he said steadily. "But I would never put my performance at risk."

"You already have," Picard said, voice clipped. He spun the padd back around and jabbed at the keyboard with his index finger. Both Riker and Beverly knew their way around a keyboard well enough; they could tell from the position of his hand that Picard was deleting the programs one by one. At Beverly's side, Riker slouched low in his seat, his long legs outstretched, and covered his eyes with one hand.

"Sir, every crewman has a right to quality of life," he said.

"That is precisely what we're preserving, Commander." With all programs deleted, Picard pressed a few more buttons. Then he hit the ready room display so they could all see what he'd done. A flashing green banner on Riker's profile bore the emblem, RESTRICTED. Symbols next to his name indicated which programs were off-limits to him. He could enter any holo so long as the safety controls were all the way up, meaning no deadly natural disasters, no sharp-toothed predators, and no derring-do. Riker's face became a pained mask that would have been funny if he didn't look so damned weary these days.

"You are still permitted relaxed safety protocols during your sessions with Worf," said Picard, his voice softening just a little. "I wouldn't want our security chief to think less of you."

Riker chuckled a little, without smiling.

"And you may enter any program you like, *regardless* of protocols ... so long as you have an escort. Group activities, workouts, and hunting expeditions are not off-limits. Neither is baseline tourism. You can still swim at the Janaran Falls on Betazed if you wish; you are permitted to go fishing in Alaska whenever you like, assuming the holodeck is free." Picard took a deep breath and set his jaw. "But you will no longer engage in solo battle simulations, Mr. Riker, and you will *not* injure yourself any further. Is that understood?"

Riker stared blankly at the programs input for him. To Beverly's eyes, they looked serviceable enough, even exciting ... but for Will, she knew, it wouldn't matter *what* they were. What mattered was that *someone else* had chosen them. With a sigh, Riker hitched his left shoulder up and straightened in his seat.

"It's been a long time since I needed a babysitter," he said a little wryly. He scrolled down and nodded to himself when he saw the restricted access lock on martial arts and extreme sports. "Maybe I'll join you for a nice gentle round of horseback riding instead, sir."

The joke put Picard at ease, although it barely showed. "Commander Riker," he said with false sternness, "I said *not* to injure yourself. My Arabian steed would toss you straight into the rodeo barrel. Not a very noble death for a Starfleet officer."

Riker laughed, all traces of unhappiness wiped away. "Joke's on you, sir. I always wanted to be a rodeo clown." He dismissed the holodeck screen and stood, adjusting his uniform. "If that's all, Captain?"

Be careful, Beverly wanted to say. She had the sudden ridiculous urge to grab his hand and pull him back, make him look her in the eyes and promise. But she kept it to herself. She glanced at Jean-Luc and saw the same hesitation on his face, the same conflict. He wrapped it up neatly and hid it all behind his default mask, and he gave Riker a captain's nod, distant and professional. Not what he wanted to do; perhaps not what Riker needed, either. But there was a spark of relief in Riker's eyes, as if he'd read their minds, knew what they'd almost done, and was glad they'd restrained themselves.

"That's all, Number One," Picard said finally. "You may go."

Chapter 8

Two weeks passed without incident ... other than increasing exasperation from the lower-ranking officers who were forced to accommodate Riker's over-exuberant athleticism in their exercise programs. The latest mission had gone well both planet-side and ship-side, with Riker handling the cargo delivery (med supplies for a minority population recovering from famine in the hinterlands) and Picard handling the diplomacy ("Why the hell did you let this minority population starve to death in the hinterlands?").

But there was one minor issue with the action report, as submitted by Lieutenant Essa. Actually, make that *two* minor issues. Their names were Qep and Mir.

Picard was familiar with Qep. He was of the planet's fifth gender — although to the uneducated human crewmen of the Enterprise, he appeared basically male. As the ground security chief, Qep had acted as Riker's guide into the hinterlands. His partner, Mir (seventh gender, totally indeterminate to the crew), had been their cultural guide and interpreter, easing misunderstandings between the rescuers and the starving citizens.

And both of them had been caught sharing Riker's sleeping bag.

At the same time.

"William," Picard muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You're giving me a headache."

Riker at least had the good grace to look abashed. With a sigh, Picard leveled out his palm, the gracious gesture of an impatient king. *Explain yourself*, that gesture said.

"...in the interest of diplomacy—" Riker tried.

"No," said Picard, voice flat. "Try again."

Riker recalibrated. "The fifth and seventh genders are *incredibly* compatible, sir," he said. "Vigorous exercise, and just being in each other's presence, was enough to instigate heat. But mating configurations for the Vonek are complex. The fifth gender can mate with the first and sixth just fine. The seventh can mate with the first and sixth as well as third. But the fifth and seventh genders can only mate with each other if they have..." He couldn't stop the sly grin from spreading over his face. "...an intermediary," he said.

The headache was getting worse.

"And that intermediary just had to be you, Number One?" Picard asked.

Riker gave a "who, me?" shrug. "They were distracted, sir. Hormones flying everywhere. It had a *distinct* negative effect on their performance. I simply made a tactical decision to ... ease their distraction."

"A headache and a half," Picard decided. He rubbed his temples with the back of his hand. "Keep it discreet next time, Commander. And keep the delicate sensibilities of your Away Team in mind. Poor Lieutenant Essa is fair traumatized by what he saw."

"He didn't even see *them*, really. I was the naked one." Riker's chest swelled with mischievous pride. "They called me the *conduit*. Because they need someone in the middle to—"

"I don't want to know the details any more than Essa did," said Picard, his voice almost swallowed by Riker's laughter. "Dismissed, Number One."

"Aye, sir." Riker stood with great dignity, hands clasped behind his back. "It was necessary for the mission, sir," he said with false gravity.

Picard just gave him a flat look.

"Dismissed."

Troi was at a packed table, stirring something ice-cold and carnation-red and listening more to the moods around her than the conversation. There were two empty seats amid the crowd, one right next to Troi and one opposite her, but when Commander Riker walked in, he glanced her way and acted as if the table were full. He went straight to the bar instead, where a group of rowdy lieutenants welcomed him with a cheer.

One of those lieutenants disconnected from the pack. Troi recognized him. Tall, fine-boned, and dark-skinned, he was the lieutenant who'd accompanied her to Maeax. The one who'd gone somewhere deep inside himself when the violence started, competent but far away.

"Firash," Troi called to him. He raised his eyebrows and made a beeline for the empty seat at Troi's side. "Too noisy over there?" Troi asked.

Lieutenant Essa hesitated. His reluctance was obvious, partially connected to his low rank, partially to Troi herself. Instinctively, humans in distress seemed to shy away from empaths. There was a level of distrust there, a natural level, that Troi had managed to overcome with all her older crewmates. But Essa was new, and still recovering.

"It's Commander Riker, isn't it?" Troi said sympathetically, leaning forward on the table with her arms crossed.

People were always unwilling to complain to her about Riker. It was like they thought she'd be offended on his behalf.

“It is,” Firash admitted. Geordi came back from the bar and passed Firash a shot of pure unflavored synthehol, but Firash only twisted the glass in a tiny circle. He didn’t drink. “I was with him in the hinterlands,” he said.

Troi raised her chin. “They’ve been giving you more planetside missions. That means you’ve really proven yourself to Captain Picard.”

He smiled a little bashfully and dipped his head in response, but whatever had happened planetside still bothered him.

“What is it?” Troi asked.

His eyes shifted to Geordi and the rest of the table. They were absorbed in their own noisy conversations, not listening in. But they were Riker’s friends and Firash knew it.

“It’s just—” he started.

“I heard it was two aliens!” said a lieutenant at the bar, and Riker tossed his head back with a laugh.

“Two and a half, actually,” he said. “You see, the seventh gender — well, a gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.”

Troi met Firash’s eyes with a muted, knowing smile, her teeth covered. Firash returned the grin with a weary one of his own.

“I’m the one who caught them in bed together,” he admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing to me?”

Before Firash could answer, the pack of drunk lieutenants called for a round of drinks. One of them patted Riker on the back and Troi could feel his discomfort from across the room. His eyes were tight but he was still smiling, and he tossed back the whiskey Guinan gave him without hesitation. Chatter overlapped. One lieutenant wanted the grimy details. Another loudly speculated on just how long copulation lasted with the many-gendered aliens Riker had seduced ... or been seduced by.

“Pretty long,” Riker admitted.

“Hours,” Firash muttered.

“They weren’t very subtle about it, I suppose,” said Troi.

“No.”

“—can’t imagine, let alone two,” one of the lieutenants said.

“The man must be starving,” said another. “Guinan!”

And a plate full of food materialized at Riker’s elbow. He glanced down at it, his mask slipping. No more humor, no more smug satisfaction. His eyes darted over every item on the plate with an expression Troi recognized more from the battlefield than the dinner table. It was the expression of a soldier sizing up his enemies and realizing there were just too many to take.

“Excuse me,” Riker said, barely audible in all the din. He slipped away from the roaring lieutenants and out of Ten-Forward entirely. Troi watched him go, wanted to follow him, felt the screaming tension inside his mind that told her to stay away. And the embarrassment and uncertainty in Firash, his desire to talk it out with her, to work through his conflicted feelings on Riker’s performance in the field.

“He’s been distracted,” Firash said, calling her attention back. “A distracted commander has no place on a potential battlefield.”

At Troi’s side, Geordi stood and left, loudly proclaiming that his last drink went straight to his bladder. One by one, the other guests at Troi’s table found excuses to leave, taking to the dance floor or flocking to the bar, and Troi reminded herself to thank Geordi the next time she saw him.

But for now she turned to Firash.

“I’m listening,” she said.

Outside Ten-Forward, Geordi focused on the swelling nausea and drunkenness inside him and turned it down a notch. A pleasant hum warming his blood, a nice alcohol-induced looseness... that was better. Music thumped through the walls, but the corridor was deserted and cool, without the body heat built up from so many people dancing and drinking all at once.

He made his way to the little head down the hall. This one was always less packed than the two in Ten-Forward. Geordi pushed through the open doors and paused to orient himself, already turning toward the urinals.

He made it one step. From the closed stall door, there was a wretched gagging noise and a splash of vomit. Geordi paused, his mind whirring. No one ever let the synthehol affect them that much; if you felt the need to puke coming on, you could always just concentrate and flip back to sobriety in an instant. But from the stall there came a soft moan, another trickle of vomit, the sound of someone spitting into the toilet bowl...

And in that moan, there was a voice Geordi recognized.

“Commander Riker?” he asked, puzzled. He adjusted his VISOR and took Riker’s vitals as best he could: body temperature low, lots of sweat, elevated heart rate and breathing. “You alright in there?”

“Too much whiskey,” said Riker, his voice ragged.

Geordi let the lie sit between them. He watched Riker's heart rate stabilize, a painfully slow process, and then Riker climbed heavily to his feet and flushed the commode. When he came out, he was pale and glassy-eyed, his hair pushed back from his forehead and held in place by glistening beads of sweat.

"I'll walk you home," Geordi said.

Riker dipped his head in thanks; he obviously knew better than to argue. He just washed his mouth out in the sink and followed Geordi through the door. They didn't speak; they walked shoulder to shoulder, Geordi with his hands in his pockets and Riker occasionally swiping at his lips like he could still taste bile. Maybe Guinan had given him real whiskey, Geordi decided. She did that sometimes ... especially for Riker. Specifically because she knew Riker could handle it.

Most days.

"Here," Riker said, his voice crackling in his throat. Geordi jumped forward a few steps to make the door open and Riker followed him inside at a slower pace. Geordi had never been in Riker's quarters before — they were sparse, undecorated, with the window set to a plain holographic view of the stars outside. That was interesting. Most people set their windows to show a planetary landscape — home, or a vacation spot they really liked, something peaceful. Something that had meaning to them. While Riker brushed his teeth, Geordi took a slow tour of the quarters.

Here was Riker's trombone. The wooden horga'hn Picard had bought for him years ago, from Risa, was gone now. Maybe he'd given it away or just packed it in a box and hidden it. But there were no photos, no personal possessions, beyond the trombone, and Riker's furniture was still in the default configuration that every Starfleet officer received when they came aboard.

In the bathroom, Riker's shower started up and ended so fast that he couldn't have done anything more than duck his head beneath the spray. When he emerged, his hair was dripping but he was still fully-dressed.

"Alright?" Geordi asked, his heart clenching. He couldn't be sure why.

"Alright," said Riker softly. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Geordi brushed past him to the door. He closed his fingers around Riker's forearm as he went — just to give him a light squeeze — and Riker grabbed him back. But Riker didn't let go. His grip slipped from Geordi's forearm to his fingers, grasping at his hand as he tried to pull away.

"You can stay," Riker said, not quite looking Geordi in the eyes.

"Sir?"

Riker didn't repeat himself. He curled his fingers around Geordi's, light and inviting. And Geordi's throat closed up when he realized what Riker meant.

"No," he said, barely audible.

Riker's face creased. He gave a clipped nod and let Geordi go.

"Sir—" Geordi started, concerned now.

"Thanks for keeping an eye out for me," said Riker. He hit the door release and leaned against the wall, his features smooth and composed. "I'll see you later."

The right thing to do would be to have a conversation. Geordi knew it. But his heart was pounding and he had a million alarm bells going off in his head. He studied Riker closely as he passed through the open door — eyes shuttered, but willing enough to meet Geordi's gaze, to pretend like he was an open book. Unbothered. Unembarrassed. And maybe that was true, but...

"Goodnight, Geordi," said Riker, with all the firm paternal authority of command.

"Goodnight, sir," said Geordi helplessly.

The doors closed in his face.

Worf checked the computer. There were two different versions of his calisthenics program. One was a full-blown Klingon program, designed to test even his limits. The other, somewhat softer, was for the days when Commander Riker joined him. In this program, the heat and chaotic environment were the same, but the creatures he and Riker fought would be somewhat less deadly, somewhat weaker. This would give Riker the ability to fight longer, closer to Worf's actual workout time.

It was a matter of honoring one's fellow warriors, of course. Not a matter of spending extra time with a friend.

"Ready when you are," said Riker cheerfully, at the holodeck gate.

Worf grunted an acknowledgement and set the program to begin in five. He joined Riker as the holodeck shimmered and transformed into a fiery Klingon jungle. Animals chattered and howled all around them. Here they would face enormous snakes with paralytic venom in their fangs — wildcats six times the size of an adult man — boars with sixteen tusks and two prehensile tails. The first few rounds would be hand-to-hand, as always, but as the beasts got bigger, the holodeck would provide Riker and Worf with swords.

Riker shifted into a defensive stance, his eyes gleaming. Worf guarded his back, watching the foliage for the first sign of trouble. Leaves rustled. Twigs snapped. Deep in the bushes ahead of him, an animal chuffed out a hot breath of air and readied for the attack.

It was a nice, peaceful way to start the morning.

“Left!” Riker cried, and Worf spun to defend his left flank just as a massive bear-like creature charged out of the woods. Spiky tendrils jutted out of its fur coat, each one sharp enough to leave its victim bleeding, and Worf didn’t care to find out what sort of nasty neurotoxin might be hiding in those points. His heart sang and his blood raced, and with Riker at his back, with both of them moving on pure instinct and adrenaline, they took the bear down.

And the flock of razor-beaked birds that followed it.

And the hyena-esque pack of baying creatures that came next.

And then, when both of them were just a little bruised and bloodied, a pair of swords glimmered into place in each of their hands. Riker checked his hair in his reflection on the blade.

“This is where the fun starts,” he said cheerfully, and there was a frenzied look in his eye, a battle lust that Worf had never seen before, a sizzling energy that was contagious.

But actually, this was where the fun *ended*.

The next creature to attack them was a cartiga, a wildcat so big it could crush a human skull beneath one paw. They’d fought one of these before — a point of contention between them, because Riker had somehow managed to kill it with his bare hands, and Worf insisted he’d only done so because Worf had weakened it first — so Worf wasn’t too worried when it circled them. They knew its weak points, its blind spots. They knew how to play with it, exhaust it, before moving in for the kill. And Riker, despite his human stamina or lack thereof, was an excellent tactician with a sharp instinct for when to push and when to fall back, so when he led the cartiga on a dance — fast swords and faster feet — Worf wasn’t worried.

Until Riker twirled in a circle to evade the cartiga’s paws. It was an elegant move. If he’d done it right, he should have been able to raise his sword at the end and embed his blade right in the cartiga’s arm. But despite his perfect execution, Riker stumbled when he came full-circle, his face pale and his eyes glassy. His knees gave out. He swayed and dropped his blade.

He fell right into the cartiga’s grasp.

“*COMMANDER!*” Worf bellowed — forgetting, for a second, that this was a simulation. The cartiga drove Riker to the ground, its bodyweight pressing down on his chest, his ribs, and Riker bared his teeth in a silent groan. “End simulation!” said Worf, his voice tinged with alarm.

“You— you have to say—”

“*Computer*, end simulation!” Worf corrected himself, and the cartiga, the jungle, the blood — all of it faded away, and there was just Riker, his back arched and his body trembling, on the holodeck floor. He twisted at the hips, trying to roll on his side, and something inside him popped, and with a cry of pain, Riker went limp.

“I’m fine,” he said, the skin around his eyes going white. He couldn’t seem to really see Worf as he approached. Gingerly, Worf felt Riker’s ribs — the clear delineation where they’d broken — and hissed between his teeth.

“You fell,” said Worf, a panicked accusation in his voice. “Why did you fall?”

“Dizzy.”

“Your ribs are broken. Can you—?”

Riker coughed. A dark slick of blood coated his chin. “I’m fine,” he said again, weakly now. “That damn cat just ... Worf, did I ever tell you how much I hate cats?”

Worf didn’t bother answering. He slipped an arm under Riker’s legs and another around his waist. He stood, grappling with Riker’s weight easily, and held him close to his chest. He was light. Too light.

“Transport room,” said Worf into his communicator, his voice low. “Two to sickbay.”

A beam of light scattered them both, leaving nothing behind but a drop of blood on the holodeck floor.

Chapter 9

Will Riker didn't look good.

His eyes were lively but hooded, with deep bags underneath. His skin was pale and slick with sweat, and regularly, as Beverly circled him with the scanner, she stopped to wipe a moisture-wicking cloth over his forehead and cheeks. As quick as she could pump fluids into his body, his pores were pumping them back out.

"Maybe you just ought to skip the regeneration, Doc," he said. "At the rate I'm breaking ribs, it might be more efficient to implant new ones. Steel, this time."

"All the better to puncture your lungs." Beverly kept her face blank as she read the scanner's screen. He hadn't been eating. He'd lost 12 kilos since the last time she took his stats. And his water levels...

Beverly paced away from Riker, pretending not to see the spark of humor in his eyes. She fetched a cup of water for him and set it down at his bedside with a clink.

"Drink," she said.

Riker extricated his arm from beneath the blanket and grasped at the cup with numb fingers. His angle was awkward, but Beverly made no effort to help. She wanted to see what he would do, and she wasn't surprised when he tried to sit up, his abs clenching and a fresh jolt of agony going through his ribs.

"Ah..." he said, losing his grip on the water. Beverly steadied it before it could fall.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" she said. "Painkillers aren't as effective when your patient won't eat."

Riker's eyes had been scrunched tight in pain, but now they flew open. He studied her face — stern and unimpressed, the same look she reserved for Wesley when he needed to think she was disappointed in him. Riker didn't seem to know what to make of it. He edged slightly away from her and stared at the opposite wall, processing.

"Mr. Worf," Beverly called.

Worf was stationed just outside. He ducked through the open door, his face professionally blank and his shoulders stiff. "Yes, Doctor?"

"I'm requisitioning you as sickbay muscle until your shift is over. Help Mr. Riker drink his water, please. He's severely dehydrated."

Worf nodded solemnly. He wedged one strong hand between Riker's shoulder blades and leveraged him into a more or less upright position.

"Were you listening?" Riker asked.

"No," said Worf firmly. He helped Riker steady the glass of water, but didn't hold it for him.

"Doesn't a warrior always pay attention to his surroundings?" Riker asked after one sip. "Constant vigilance, Mr. Worf. What if Beverly and I were plotting an ambush?"

"Don't tease," Beverly scolded him. "Worf, did you hear anything I said to Will before you came into the room?"

Now his honor was at stake, thanks to Riker. Worf gave the commander a beady stare.

"No," he repeated. Then, after a deep breath, "I noticed you were ... atypically weak in the holodeck today, Commander."

"Thanks."

"Your muscles have atrophied," said Worf, his nostrils flaring.

"I lost some weight," said Riker flatly. "Stomach bug. Geordi can attest to that — he caught me in the head last night. Couldn't make it to my own quarters."

This seemed to offend Worf's Klingon sensibilities somewhat, for he tipped the glass hard against Riker's lips and backed away as soon as it was drained.

"Thank you, Worf," said Beverly drily, while Riker sputtered. "You may go."

"Feels like a hostage situation," Riker complained. He palmed the excess water off his chin and visibly resisted the urge to flick it at Worf's retreating back. "I should have come to you earlier, I know," he said to Beverly, dropping his voice into a conciliatory tone. "But I was embarrassed. And I've been down here an awful lot lately. I don't mean to impugn your company, but—"

"But you're sick of hyposprays and biobeds," said Beverly.

Riker's face smoothed out in relief. "Exactly." He ran a hand over his sore ribs and down to his stomach, like it ached. "Pop me some Imodium, Doc," he said. "I'll be fine."

Beverly studied him, her hands folded behind her back. Then she let her breath out in a sigh.

“Your problem isn’t a stomach bug, Will,” she said heavily. “You’re not eating. You’re not sleeping. You have elevated blood pressure, low oxygen levels, a high heart rate. All of this, plus your recent injuries in the holodeck... I’m keeping you overnight for evaluation.”

Riker digested this without expression. He glanced around for his uniform.

“Will,” Beverly prompted.

“Fine,” he said amicably, still searching. He found his jacket tucked beneath his bed and fished through it, coming up with a deck of cards in one hand and a winning grin on his face. “But you’re playing at least two games of *Sivic* with me. I can only take so much *solitaire*.”

“Some of us have work to do,” said Beverly, relieved that he was taking it so well.

“You’re telling me. *I’m* supposed to be on the bridge.”

And already, he was dealing out the cards.

Specialist DeWalt was parked in a visitor’s chair with a portable speaker in one hand and a music disc in the other, his brow creased with concentration.

“I just watched the tutorial last night, sir,” he said apologetically.

“Take your time,” said Riker. It was nighttime — shipboard-night, at least, and he’d changed an hour ago into a comfortable set of civilian pajamas and non-slip socks. They were keeping him till morning, at least, while Beverly monitored his blood pressure and kept him pumped full of water and nutritional supplements. Not the most comfortable arrangement. He watched Specialist DeWalt fiddle haplessly with the music disc, his impatience steadily rising.

“Excuse me,” he said finally, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Specialist DeWalt gave a distracted grunt as he tested the speaker’s buttons. There was a new jazz technique he wanted to show Riker, a synthetic form that sampled the ship’s radio waves for bursts of melodic static, but he’d been here for thirty minutes now and still couldn’t figure it out. Riker made his way to the sickbay head, which he’d been using with *increasing frequency* as Beverly reversed the dehydration process.

His palm rested flat on the door release. A medic appeared at his side.

“Can I help you?” asked Riker, studying the petty officer’s inscrutable face.

“Sir, I have orders to escort you.”

“Escort me?” Riker must not have heard right. He looked over his shoulder at the baffled Specialist DeWalt. “Why?”

The petty officer stared at the floor, his cheeks turning red.

“Answer me, Petty Officer.”

“Doctor Crusher’s orders, sir,” said the petty officer, shifting his feet.

Riker didn’t have time for this. He had to pee. He gestured for the kid to follow him with a rough jerk of his hand and went straight to the urinal. He wasn’t shy, but he hitched one shoulder up by instinct and felt a prickle of heat on the back of his neck as the petty officer watched him take a piss.

“Clear,” the petty officer muttered into his communicator, and Riker’s stream cut off instantly.

“What the hell was that?” he demanded. “Who are you talking to?”

The petty officer just stammered.

“What do you mean clear?” Riker said.

The poor guy looked like he wanted to melt into the floor, but Riker didn’t have much sympathy for him. “Sir, your... your urine is clear now,” the petty officer managed.

“And? You had to get an eyeful of Lil Willy to determine that? You couldn’t just ask me?”

“Dr. Crusher—”

Riker tucked himself away and slammed his palm against the sanitation pad. The clattering noise of metal against the bulkhead at least covered up his sigh. He pushed past the petty officer into his private room — and then past Specialist DeWalt, who was still struggling with the synth — and burst into the main lobby of the sickbay.

“Beverly, if you wanted a show—” he started.

Beverly gave him a quizzical look. Then she saw the petty officer over his shoulder and understood. “Will, go back to bed,” she said in the distracted, exasperated tone usually reserved for small children.

Back to bed? He was so stunned by the order — the complete dismissal of his concerns — that he didn’t know what to say. The petty officer put a gentle hand on Riker’s arm and Riker half-turned to him by instinct. He searched his face the same way he studied people at a poker game and saw ... embarrassment, concern. Sympathy.

"This is a psych hold," Riker realized and instantly he felt stupid for taking so long to realize.

"Will—" Beverly started.

"Did you send him in there to check the color of my piss?" Riker asked. "Or was he making sure I didn't...?"

"Didn't what?" Beverly asked, her voice calm and neutral.

Well, that answered that. Riker dislodged the petty officer's hand from his arm with an uneasy twitch. "How long?" he asked Beverly. "How long am I stuck here?"

It took a span of two, three breaths before she answered. Steady and soothing, like she was talking to a dangerous man.

"The captain wants to review your file," Beverly said. "He'll come to a decision in the morning."

"And what's my diagnosis?" Riker asked.

"We don't know that yet. We've barely got a grip on your symptoms."

He took another step away from the petty officer. "I can tell you my symptoms. I took a cartiga to the chest. Since when does that necessitate a psych hold?"

Beverly's lips thinned. She'd decided not to engage him unless he played along; Riker could tell from the flinty look in her eyes.

"What does necessitate a psych hold?" he asked. "I have a right to know why I'm being kept."

His heart was pounding. He needed to center himself, calm down. But only a tiny part of his brain was willing to do that. The other 95% was focused wholly on Beverly's answer.

"Anorexia," said Beverly hesitantly. "At the least."

Anorexia? Riker stared at her, his lips curling into a crooked, disbelieving smile. He looked down at himself — not fat, sure, but nowhere near as thin as ... hell, as the petty officer next to him.

"You haven't eaten any of the meals we brought you," Beverly said softly.

This was ridiculous. Riker lifted a hand and let it slap against his side. "I'm still nauseous," he said.

"You don't have the stomach flu, Will." She sighed and squared her shoulders, eyes snapping away from Riker. Back to her padd, as if he were dismissed. "We'll discuss it in the morning. For now..."

"Can I still have visitors?" Riker asked, resisting the urge to glance back at Specialist DeWalt.

Beverly's professional mask cracked. "Of course, Will," she said, looking almost hurt.

You're not a prisoner, was the unspoken message. Riker dipped his head in a grateful little nod to show he understood. That he would cooperate. Psych hold! He turned away, keeping a fair distance between himself and the petty officer, and returned to his room to find Specialist DeWalt banging the synthesizer against the bedside table in frustration.

"It's alright," said Riker easily. "We'll figure it out next time."

"Sorry, sir," said DeWalt, shame-faced. His eyes darted past Riker to the main lobby. "Are you...?"

Had he heard?

"I'm fine," said Riker. "Just sore from the holodeck. Nothing contagious." He lowered himself back into bed and arranged the thin hospital blanket over his lap. He wasn't exactly relishing the cold night ahead of him. They kept this place freezing. "What's your name, Petty Officer?" he asked.

"Texar," said the petty officer, who'd taken up a vigil by the door.

"Do you have any extra blankets, Petty Officer Texar?" Riker paused. "Or could you get mine from my quarters? I've got a quilt my grandmother made me. Can't sleep without it."

Texar hesitated. "I'll see what I can do."

And he left through the hallway, directly into the corridor outside. Riker watched him go, then turned his head to meet DeWalt's eyes. Psych hold. Anorexia, of all things. Some treacherous part of his brain conjured up his father, imagined Kyle Riker hearing of the diagnosis, the look on his face. And the embarrassment that came from this ... it wasn't just limited to fantasy. Picard would review his file in the morning and see it written out in bold lettering. And DeWalt would tell everyone in Ten-Forward what he heard today.

His chest was still tight, but when he spoke, Riker's voice was steady.

"You up for a game of Sivic?"

DeWalt looked reluctantly at the battered synthesizer and the deck of cards. He rose, as Riker had known he would. "Visiting hours are just about over, sir," he said apologetically. "Dr. Crusher told me when I came in..."

Told him what? Riker studied DeWalt's face.

"...that it would have to be brief," DeWalt said finally.

And she must have told him something else too, for him to hesitate like that. But Riker kept any suspicion off his face. He took DeWalt's hand and squeezed it lightly.

"Well, thank you for coming," he said warmly. "Come back tomorrow if you have time and we can take a look at that synth together. Okay?"

DeWalt gave a relieved nod. "Yes, sir."

Riker didn't need to dismiss him. He left on his own, his step a little lighter than it had been. And Riker was alone, with Texar fetching a quilt that didn't exist and DeWalt certain that he could come back tomorrow. He glanced at the door to the lobby. Firmly closed.

Psych hold. He swept a rough palm over his face, where the skin suddenly felt like numb rubber. That was his career, wasn't it? If he'd experienced some great trauma recently, it would be different. The loss of a comrade. Captivity. But there'd been nothing. Just the average everyday stress of running a starship, and it had worn him to the ground. They'd give him a desk job. A teaching job.

That wouldn't be so bad, he told himself. He liked kids. He had fun whenever he helped the Enterprise's teachers with their lessons. But he tried to conjure up that sense of fun, a bit of optimism, and nothing came.

He stood and exited through the hallway door as silently as he could. There was a turbolift not far from sickbay, and he was lucky enough not to be spotted as he made his way inside. He tucked himself into the corner of the lift, with cold steel pressing against his back and bumping his elbows. Arms crossed tight over a knotted stomach, he said, "Computer. Take me to the holodeck."

The turbolift whisked him away. By programming, it deposited him at the nearest empty holodeck, Level 6. Riker stepped out into the empty suite, feeling strangely small in his pajamas and socks. He studied the computer and typed in his own name. It would bring up all his programs — or at least, all the ones Picard hadn't locked.

There. Valdez, Alaska. One he hadn't used in at least a year. Last time he'd gone to the cliffs he loved as a boy, where he could see the orcas breaking through the water. His favorite type of sea creature. He'd read everything he could find on them when he was seven — remembered Mrs. Shugak bringing him a stuffed orca toy from the zoo — all those lonely exhilarating hikes to the top of the cliff for the best view. And then he remembered the day his father escorted him to the beach where one of those beautiful creatures had washed ashore. The dead-fish scent of its rotting flesh, the half-liquid globs of blubber scattered across the stones. Pink insides and yellow bone, and seabirds picking at everything they could find.

No. Riker set the computer to drop him off somewhere else, at the little river where he liked to go fishing in the mornings before school. It was easy as pie to disable the safety protocols before he went in. And it was just habit that made him do so. He liked the holodeck to be as real as possible. That was all.

The holodeck phased in around him.

Beautiful.

Riker took a deep lungful of cold air, so crisp it made his nose prickle and his throat ache. Already blood was rushing to his skin, producing an unnatural heat to make up for the cold. Snow crunched beneath his feet and soaked his socks as he moved forward, toward the sharp clear burbling of the river. Icy water trickled over stones and around thin scrimms of ice still clinging to the banks. Fish darted beneath the surface, pink and silver in the moonlight.

In his hospital pajamas, Riker sank to the ground. He pulled his knees up to his chest. He hadn't brought a fishing pole. No bait. No hooks. He just sat and watched the river rush by. He could see a thousand early mornings in that water, sneaking out of the house before his dad got up. He'd always leave while it was still dark, hoping to avoid the tension over breakfast — Dad nitpicking at his cooking or warning Will to behave at school today, digging up old complaints from teachers Kyle hadn't even spoken to in years.

Better by far to run down to the river. To fish in the cold morning air and let his thoughts slide away. And there were a thousand afternoons in the water too — evenings with Mrs. Shugak's nephews and nieces, with the sturdy Aleut girl from his baseball team, the one who always let him play with her family's sled dogs. All of them swimming or dunking each other, lifting rocks to see what was underneath.

He'd fallen in this river once.

In winter.

He'd jumped, really. He could vaguely remember it. There was a boy who stayed with him for a few months, while his dad was away and Mrs. Shugak was visiting — one of her nephews, an older kid who took Will down to the river to fish. He wasn't careful enough on the snowy banks. He fell in, weighed down by his clothes and boots. And what could Will do, except jump in after him?

He remembered inhaling cold water. Lungs burning. The awful nerve-burning pain of ice-cold water numbing his arms and legs. The frantic struggle to kick his waders off and grab onto something solid. And he remembered the miserable walk home afterward, both of them naked and dragging their wet clothes, mortified when they had to pass six different houses full of giggling kids before they made it to the Riker home. They'd hidden the embarrassment as best they could, puffing their chests out, refusing to cover themselves, winking at any girls they saw or flexing their nonexistent muscles at anyone who stared.

It would have been a funny memory.

But Kyle Riker had come home early.

Kyle Riker was waiting for them.

And the beating that came after — and when the beating was done, when Will was lying stomach-down on his bed and crying into the pillow — when his dad came in—

Riker pressed his closed eyes tight against his kneecaps until the vivid images in his head dissolved into a wall of static. He sniffed hard to clear his sinuses and shook his head. His clothes were soaked; his teeth were chattering; his hands were locked tight around his shins. Ahead of him, the icy river churned and bubbled and he could imagine it in spring, the mud sucking at his bare feet, the fish nibbling at his calves and making him laugh.

They'd find him soon.

Petty Officer Texar would abandon his search for the quilt that didn't exist. Beverly would open Riker's private room and find it empty. The computer would cough up his location in a heartbeat. So Riker sighed and pushed to his feet, ready to return before the cavalry came searching for him.

He ordered his body to turn around and head for the gate. Instead, he watched his feet take five steps forward, till his toes were hanging over the edge of the riverbank. Riker half-smiled. This wasn't what he'd meant to do. Funny how the body disobeyed you sometimes.

And then he shrugged to himself and took another step forward.

He let the icy water wash his mind away.

Chapter 10

Deanna's quarters were dark. She'd been asleep only an hour when she started shivering. Ice whispered over her blankets and crept through her skin — a weight tugged at her clothes, soaking them and filling them with lead, dragging her down to the darkness, to the mud and silvery fish at the bottom of a river — and burning sensation flared in her lungs, right at the bottom, and ate up the oxygen there, and climbed to scrape at her esophagus until she screamed.

And the numbness of soul-deep despair flooded in.

She woke with a gasp, dry and safe and warm in her own bed, the taste of a freshwater river still filling her mouth.

"Will," she said.

Call it a doctor's instinct. Beverly knew something was wrong before she got the emergency call. In fact, she pushed to her feet and was halfway to Riker's room when a red-faced Petty Officer Texar came barreling through the other side. He held an armful of standard-issue Starfleet blankets close to his chest.

"There is no quilt," he blurted.

"What?" Beverly said. She glanced past him at the empty private room. The feeling of wrongness intensified, the same feeling she got in the operating room just before things went south, and Beverly figured the details didn't matter. "Computer, locate—"

"Sickbay to Holodeck Six!"

Beverly stumbled over Riker's name and tapped her communicator. That was Deanna's voice, her accent thick, every word tinged with urgency. "Medkit," Beverly snapped to Texar.

He hurled the blankets to the far corner and scrambled for the emergency kit. The transport beam caught both of them just as his fingers closed around the handle and Beverly secured her scanner. Time stopped; light fizzled around them in a spray of gold sparks.

When she could breathe again, she stood in an empty holodeck, and Deanna and Will Riker were on the tile floor. Both wore their pajamas, but Riker's were soaked through with water. He was limp, unconscious, with Deanna sprawled over his chest in a desperate attempt to wake him.

And his skin was tinged blue.

"A promotion?" Data said. He tilted his head to the side in a birdlike movement.

"Of a sort," said Picard, his lips thin. "Commander Data, you are now acting first officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise. I trust you will live up to the rank."

"Of course, sir," said Data mildly. "But what has happened to Commander Riker?"

Picard's hands rested flat on his desk, fingers splayed. In the corner of the room, soft light emanated from Picard's fish tank, the rays tinged with color from the fishes' multicolored scales and the greenery floating gently through the water. Picard's breathing was slow and deliberate, his heart rate at a meditation level.

"Commander Riker," said Picard, "has suffered a medical emergency. You will take his place until sickbay gets him back on his feet."

"I have observed signs of ill health in Commander Riker as of late," Data conceded.

"Have you," said Picard flatly.

"His body temperature has fluctuated two degrees higher and lower than average over the past week," Data said. "And I have noticed occasional sharp spikes in his respiration and heart rate. Perhaps I should have taken ... preventative measures."

"Perhaps," said Picard, his voice rough. He turned his gaze to his padd. There were tight lines at the corners of his eyes. "Then again, perhaps all of us could have. Not least of which is Commander Riker himself."

"Sir?"

"Every Starfleet officer has a responsibility to keep himself shipshape, Data. Remember that."

Picard was often what Geordi called 'sharp.' Data filed this glare, this tone, as evidence that Geordi wasn't lying. But what caused the sharpness, precisely, he didn't know.

He suspected it was worry.

"He will recover, sir," said Data. "I am confident in Dr. Crusher's abilities as chief medical officer."

"As am I," Picard muttered. "Dismissed, Commander Data."

The stars twinkled outside the viewport of Ten-Forward, their light reflecting off the metallic stands where Riker and his band usually played.

Today those stands were empty and the music was being pumped through the Enterprise's sound system, no replacement for the real thing. Geordi would take the little flubs and missteps of a live band over recorded perfection any day.

"Have you heard?" said someone at the bar.

Geordi kept his head down and his eyes on his drink.

"Commander Riker?" asked a voice he recognized. Ensign Peeler.

"Yeah."

"Isn't he on leave?" Peeler asked.

The lieutenant next to her held his finger up for a shot, and Guinan obliged. Time stopped for a swig of tequila, a terse shake of the head, a ragged breath. "He's in sickbay," said the lieutenant. "Some sort of accident in the holodeck."

"Lots of those recently," Peeler noted. Her jaw tightened and her eyes slipped far away, unnoticed by her companion. She'd gone on an away mission with Riker recently, Geordi remembered. It was the flower festival on Maeax, the one that went so poorly. Peeler was friends with one of his engineers, Da Costa, and he'd talked for a whole week about how bad the smoke inhalation was, how Peeler was still coughing.

"Yeah, it's the latest in a long string of accidents," the lieutenant said. "But this one was different."

"How so?"

The lieutenant passed Peeler a shot glass. They clinked the rims against each other, but only the lieutenant drank. Peeler stared blankly at her drink and then set it aside, sucking on a piece of citrus fruit.

"*Before* it was just ... what you'd *expect* from a holodeck accident," the lieutenant said. "I heard he broke an ankle or something when he was hiking."

"Ribs, I think."

"No, the ribs were from that Klingon program. It doesn't matter." The lieutenant shook his head. "This time it wasn't really an accident, is what I heard."

"Someone attacked him?" Peeler asked. Geordi took an uneasy sip of his drink and focused in on the lieutenant's heart rate through his VISOR.

"That's not what I mean," the lieutenant said. "I mean..." He lowered his voice. "I heard he tried to kill himself."

"That's ridiculous," Peeler snapped, but she whipped her head away and refused to meet the lieutenant's eyes. At his table, Geordi's heart was pounding and his breath was short. He watched the lieutenant's pulse and didn't see a single change, not like he'd expect from a liar. "If he wanted to kill himself he wouldn't have to use the holodeck," Peeler said. "He'd just use his phaser. And anyway, this is Commander *Riker*."

"I'm just telling you what I heard."

Geordi pushed his mug away. The lieutenant and Ensign Peeler didn't notice him brushing past; they were still knee-deep in their argument, Peeler doing her damndest to talk the lieutenant out of spreading what was obviously malicious gossip. And Riker was lucky it was such an outrageous lie. No one would believe it. You thought of Riker and you saw his smile, heard the warmth in his voice. You could call up your last conversation with him and it was probably something like "I heard you played the keyboard in the Academy band!" or "How's your uncle doing? Did he like that hotel? I knew he would!"

But...

That wasn't what *Geordi's* last conversation with Riker had been like. And the lieutenant's heartbeat proved he wasn't lying.

Geordi played back his last conversation with Riker, looking for clues, and saw Riker's darkened room in a new light, sparse and undecorated. Lonely. He could still feel Riker's feverish fingers on his arm, see the water dripping from his hair. The hunger in his eyes, that desperation in his voice, so thinly-veiled. Asking Geordi to stay.

Geordi stepped into the turbolift and ran a palm over his forehead. A sigh escaped his lips.

"Take me to sickbay," he said.

He wouldn't go inside, of course. He probably wasn't allowed yet. Everyone on bridge crew knew there had been another accident, that Data was temporarily stepping into Riker's shoes. But whatever had happened, Dr. Crusher probably wasn't allowing visitors until tomorrow. When the turbolift doors slid open, Geordi walked up to the sickbay lobby and just peeked through the window, letting his VISOR zero in on the biobed.

That was Riker, alright. His dark hair was stark against unusually pale skin. His eyes were closed. He looked...

He looked small, Geordi realized. Impossibly small.

When had Riker lost so much weight?

"You're the first to request a visit," Dr. Crusher said.

Worf stood at uncomfortable attention on the other side of her desk. If he glanced to his right, he would see the medics dismantling the biobed's rings and shifting Commander Riker onto a transport cot. But out of respect for Commander Riker as a warrior, Worf did not look, even through his better-than-average peripheral vision. He kept his gaze squarely on Dr. Crusher, who was still waiting for an answer.

Worf didn't give her one.

"Well, he's not awake," Crusher said eventually, raising an eyebrow.

"I am aware."

She searched his face. Luckily, Klingons were mostly unreadable to humans, and Worf in particular never let his expression drop from a neutral battle mask.

"Don't disturb him," Crusher said.

"I will not."

She glanced over his shoulder. Worf could hear the squeak of a stretcher's wheels on the sickbay floor and the hiss of a private room's doors.

"Give them a moment to get him settled," she said. Worf nodded. He kept his fists clenched at his side, claws digging into his palms. "Has Captain Picard briefed you on what happened?" Crusher asked.

"I do not wish to know."

Her sharp eyes darted back to him. "Really?"

Worf inclined his head in a solemn nod. "Commander Riker's weaknesses are none of my business," he said firmly.

Crusher gave him a pained look.

"Please don't use that word with him," she said, "if he wakes up."

"Of course not."

If, she said. Worf, of course, allowed no alarm to reach his face. But Crusher softened a little, as if she'd read him anyway.

"I only mean if he wakes up while you're in there, Worf. He's stable."

"Of course he is stable," Worf rumbled, bristling a little. Crusher gave him a very human *'I give up'* look and checked over his shoulder again. He heard the tap of footsteps as a medical team exited Riker's room.

"You can see him now," Crusher said.

Worf gathered up all his warlike discomfort and balled it up into a tiny, almost unnoticeable knot somewhere between his shoulders. Which were currently hitched up to his ears. He marched straight to the private room where Riker was sleeping and stepped inside.

The lights were darkened, with just a single warm glow by the head, what Alexander might call a 'night light'. The holoscreen was set to reflect the stars outside, a peaceful view. On Riker's bedside table was a card made of creamy white paper, old-fashioned, with a crude inkstain drawing of ... Worf picked it up and studied it in the light from the holoscreen. An orca. He'd seen them on a family visit to the oceans of Earth when he was a child. He set the card aside and studied Riker, the hospital pajamas and the messy hair, still damp; the Starfleet blankets piled high over his body to keep his fragile temperature intact.

I want you to help me die, Worf told Riker once.

Few on the Enterprise had made such a concerted effort to befriend Worf. Certainly none had gone at it with the doggedness and consistency that Riker had. No matter how many jokes fell flat, he was always ready with another, and seemed to care very little that as a warrior, this humor, these ready smiles, were all beneath his dignity. And when Worf was paralyzed, none had argued with him so passionately as Riker, with that fire in his eyes and a stubborn refusal to budge even when Picard himself was willing to step aside and let Worf make his own choice.

He knew Riker's mother had died when he was very young. He didn't know how. And he could remember the pain on Riker's face when he insisted that young Alexander be the one to bring Worf his knife.

For such a man to attempt suicide was the height of hypocrisy. Perhaps he had argued so strenuously only because Worf's desires, his self-hatred, reflected Riker's own. If so, then by the Klingon code of honor, Riker was truly too pathetic to be called a warrior. But...

"I will stay," said Worf fiercely, to an empty room, to Riker's sleeping face. He spun on his heel and stormed back into the lobby. "Doctor Crusher!" he thundered.

She looked up from her desk, eyes wide.

"I will stay with Commander Riker," Worf said, ready to fight her if she said no. "I will be his personal guard."

Her eyebrows furrowed. She parted her lips to ask him a question but Worf sliced his palm through the air to cut her off.

"There will be no more accidents," he said firmly. "And he will *not* be mistreated under my watch."

“Worf, absolutely *no one* in my sickbay gets mistreated,” said Crusher, exasperated.

His chest swelled. He stared her down with the wild eyes of a Klingon warrior in full bloodlust. “I will stay,” he said again.

Crusher firmed her lips and made a sharp dismissive gesture. “Fine, Worf. You can stay.”

With a clipped nod, he returned to Riker’s room. Here he would stand vigil — protect him — make sure no further harm came to pass. And he would make sure, too, that no one was tactless enough to point out to Commander Riker his own hypocrisy or weakness. And he would bite the throat off anyone who did. If anyone lectured Riker — as he deserved — then it would be Worf himself, and it would be weeks or months from now, when the commander was strong and fit and ready to be lambasted. Until then... until then, it was Worf’s duty to simply keep him alive.

He had his back to the lobby. He didn’t see the sad, fond look that Dr. Crusher sent his way.

Chapter 11

It was past noon the next day when Troi sensed the nauseated swirl of unconsciousness shift inside Riker's mind. He was in a dark room — pitch-black, with his sense of gravity and balance turned upside down. Usually humans could sense pain, the position of their limbs, which way was up, but for the moment all Riker knew was that his stomach was pinched and heaving, that his throat was raw and sore.

Troi arrived in sickbay at the tail end of it, in time to see Worf wiping Riker's mouth and Crusher changing the sheets. The scent of bile was thick in the air but Riker was still asleep. Troi dipped into his mind again. He was lying flat on his back, he realized. But he couldn't move. That meant he was in the dojo, and now that he thought about it, he could smell the scent of sweat and rubber, of water-based sanitizer, all too well.

"He'll wake soon," said Troi softly. She was dimly aware of Worf and Crusher sharing a glance, silently deciding to give her some privacy. But mostly she was tuned into Riker's mind. If he was in the dojo, and he couldn't move, then...

A sense of mortification and pain washed over him. It was so intense that it blotted out all traces of memory and thought.

Imzadi, Troi said, cutting through the wall of emotion. *It's time to wake up.*

Imzadi? Asleep, Riker puzzled over her voice. She wasn't supposed to be here. Not in Valdez. Not in the dojo. He tried to picture Troi in the snow, walking through the blizzard that night and finding him on the mat where his father left him—

Wake up, Troi said, cupping his cheek. She guided his head to the side as he gagged. Nothing came up this time, but his lips stretched open and his face creased in pain. Groggy, confused, he opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was her.

"Mza..." he murmured. His lips brushed against her palm in a clumsy kiss.

"You're in sickbay," said Troi gently. "Do you remember what happened?"

He let his eyes slide closed and gave a sleepy nod. Yes, he remembered. The dojo. Anbo-jyutsu, without armor or helmets. The deafening crack of bone as he went down.

"Can't move my legs," he said.

"Yes, you can." Troi reached over and wrapped a hand around his ankle, shaking it gently. When he felt her skin against his, Riker's eyes flew open and he tried to sit up, more fully awake now.

"What— Deanna—?"

Now his memories really *did* flood back. He remembered the river. The shock of cold water against his skin. The sudden crumple of his body against tile when the simulation ended and the river became the holodeck floor.

"You kissed me," he said, still confused.

"I resuscitated you," said Troi flatly. She sat on the edge of his bed. "You had a great deal of water in your lungs."

He processed that with a hint of surprise, but nothing too great. Mostly he was surprised she'd made it in time, and the removed factual way that he recalled this hit Troi like a brick wall. Riker studied himself, dismissing Troi for the moment — making sure he was in pajamas instead of naked, wiping his lips and then checking his palm for residue, as if he remembered, in some sense, that he had vomited. He looked, finally, to the closed bedroom door.

"Will," said Troi softly, calling his attention back to her.

He met her eyes. His mind was open, unguarded. Still hazy from sleep. From drowning.

"How did you fall into the river?" Troi asked.

Her stomach was tight. She kept her face blank and her emotions under tight control ... but he would sense them anyway. Anxiety, concern. He even rubbed his chest and furrowed his eyebrows, as if he couldn't tell those were *her* emotions, not his.

"I...I didn't fall," he said finally.

"You jumped?" Troi asked, no judgment in her voice. His shoulders relaxed a little.

"I just stepped in," he said.

Later, when he woke up fully, for real, he would regret telling her. He would be angry that she asked him while he was still out of it, before he had the sense to lie. But now he was studying her face openly, willing to read her and to be read in turn, anxious for a reaction, eyes wide.

"Why did you step in?" Troi asked, taking his hand.

With a sigh, he leaned back into the mattress. His fingers curled around hers in a limp squeeze, his strength barely there.

"Were you trying to kill yourself?" Troi asked.

Riker shrugged.

His face twisted.

He nodded. Just once.

“By drowning?” Troi prompted.

“Freezing,” he corrected mindlessly. Another shrug, jerky and small. His voice was tight. “Drowning, yeah. It doesn’t matter. I wanted...”

She tilted her head and gave his hand another squeeze. She waited.

“I wanted to go numb,” he said. His eyes were fixed on her face but they were hazy, like he couldn’t really see her. Maybe, until the meds wore off, she and all his other visitors would be just blurry blobs hovering over him. Maybe that was why he found it so easy to talk. “I wanted to go numb forever,” he said. “And never feel anything again.”

“You almost succeeded,” Troi told him, keeping her voice neutral.

He gave her a watery smile. It didn’t last long. Before she had time to be shocked or offended by that grin, it wavered — and his lips trembled, and he brought his hand up, still locked with hers, to hide his face. All she heard was a ragged breath, too thin to be a sob. She heard Kyle Riker’s voice echoing from Riker’s mind into her own, scolding a two-year-old boy for crying at his mother’s funeral. And she saw the way that memory affected Riker, how he held his breath and squeezed his eyes shut until the need to cry faded away and became the need for sleep.

Oh, Will, she said.

Picard’s ready room was a false peace. The gentle music piping through his speakers melted from Faure to Satie to Ravel so smoothly that Picard scarcely noticed the transition. If he allowed himself, he could become hypnotized by the pale wash of color and light emanating from his fish tank, by the flash of silver coming off those graceful fins. But he couldn’t allow that. Instead his attention was riveted on the video footage from the holodeck suite. The scent of Earl Grey went from fragrant to sour as it cooled and the replicant tea leaves congealed by his elbow.

The footage was clear. Commander William Riker had gone into the water willingly, uncoerced. He didn’t fall. He didn’t even attempt to get out.

With a sigh, Picard banished the footage and checked his padd. Four messages were waiting for him. Two were from sickbay — first Beverly, then Counselor Troi, both informing him that Will was awake. The third was from a record keeper in Valdez, Alaska, with a hefty file attached as per Picard’s request. And the fourth was from Risa.

“Dr. Crusher,” Picard said, tapping his communicator. “Is Commander Riker lucid?”

There was a pause before she spoke, long enough to tell him she was probably in the room with Riker when Picard asked. Once she made it out of earshot, she responded.

“He’s awake, Captain, and getting more lucid by the second. If you plan to interrogate him, you might want to come quick. Deanna’s had a bit of luck with him.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning he’s honest,” said Beverly, her voice clipped, “and I don’t think that’ll last very long.”

He was still addled, then, from a mix of hypothermia and near-drowning, and the drugs Beverly had given him to keep him alive. That combination would temporarily lower anyone’s guard.

Picard considered his options. It was good, he decided, for Troi to be there now. She and Will had an odd relationship — one he couldn’t quite read, and occasionally tried to push. *She* could come to him when he was still out of it, and might actually have a positive impact. Whereas if *Picard* saw him now, like this — wrangled answers out of him before he was fully awake — it would cause only shame when Riker finally did come around.

“Call me when he wakes,” Picard said to his communicator.

“Meaning?” Beverly asked, mirroring Picard’s tone from earlier. Picard gave it some thought, ticking over the officers he knew to be in sickbay, and what he knew of Will’s personality. His various masks: the competent officer, the shallow jokester. He glanced back at his padd, at the messages waiting for him, and felt his heart twist even as a deep, burning anger rose in his gut. Some of it, rightfully, was directed at Kyle Riker, at the Federation, at the authorities in Valdez. But if he were honest, he would admit that most of it was directed, fairly or not, at the man who rested in sickbay, always smiling, always deflecting with a joke and ready to flirt. How to tell when Riker was truly lucid...

Picard swallowed his anger and let it out in a short sigh.

“Call me when he tries to make Worf laugh,” he said.

1600.

The quick tap of shoes on the medbay floor suddenly slowed. From the lobby to the private rooms down the corridor, medics and technicians turned to look as Captain Picard walked in. Those who didn’t already know what had happened with Commander Riker understood — at least partially — when they saw the dark, tight expression on Picard’s face.

From Riker's private room, Counselor Troi emerged. Any medics peeking in might have seen Worf standing guard and Commander Riker leaning on his elbows, his skin atypically pale as he set up a painstaking game of solitaire. The cards on his bedside table were crooked, the piles uneven, and his fingers trembled slightly as he set a new one down. But then the doors hissed shut and there was nothing else to see.

"Counselor."

Troi took Picard by the elbow and led him down the hall to Beverly's office. She met them halfway, all three of them huddled close together so no one could overhear.

"He's stable," Beverly said. "Physically."

"You looked over the files I sent you?"

She nodded, her lips pursed. She didn't say anything further, and Picard didn't push her. "Counselor?" he prompted again.

Troi's face darkened as she warred with her own instinctive protectiveness. It was counterintuitive, Picard supposed, for her to offer Riker up to the dogs. Whatever happened next, in that private room, it would tear Riker apart. And Troi knew it.

And she knew it was necessary.

"Will he be confined to sickbay?" Troi asked. It wasn't clear whether she was asking Picard or Beverly.

"I won't allow it," Beverly said. "As soon as we're certain he's not an active suicide risk, he'll be released."

"With a guard," said Picard firmly.

Beverly's shoulder twitched in what might have been a shrug.

"But will he be safe, out there?" Troi asked. Then her face fell and she lowered her head. "Oh, I know, Beverly. We can't imprison him here. I just..."

Picard looked away as Beverly took Troi's hand. He studied the door to Riker's private room instead.

"It won't do him any good to stay here," Beverly said softly. "What he *needs* is shore leave. A break from the stress ... someone to talk to..."

"Is that what William Riker needs?" asked Picard, voice sharp. "Or is that what you recommend for any generic patient?"

"Just because he's a commander doesn't mean he's not my patient," Beverly said, her temper flaring.

"No, Doctor. But you forget the individual."

"And you forget that *I'm* the chief medical officer," Beverly shot back. "Not you. I won't hold him against his will in sickbay, Jean-Luc. His mind would rot faster than he could..."

"But he can't be *grounded*, Beverly," said Picard, his voice soft and intense. He leaned closer to her, so he could speak even more quietly.

"The moment we tell him, whether accidentally or deliberately, that he's no longer useful to Starfleet..." He shook his head and turned to Troi.

"What do you sense from him, Counselor?"

She hesitated. "He's still hurting, Captain. He wants..." She lowered her eyes and spoke to the floor. "He wants the pain to go away."

She winced at her own words and went silent. As a group, they spun to face Riker's private room, where the door was open and Riker himself was peeking out at them. For just a split second, his face was a hollow mask. Then he wagged his eyebrows and broke into a crooked smile.

"My ears are burning," he said. "Anything good?"

Troi looked to Picard for help. Beverly looked at him too, but it was more of a warning, and Picard pretended to see neither. He straightened his uniform jacket and squared his shoulders.

"Commander," he said levelly. "May I come inside?"

Riker gave an ironic little bow and swept an arm out to welcome Picard into his room. Every movement, no matter how flamboyant or artificially relaxed, looked sore. As Picard stepped past him, Worf abandoned his post and ducked out, leaving the two of them alone.

"I see you've already made yourself at home," Picard said, taking in the room. Those were Riker's own blankets folded over the foot of the bed. And that was a hand-drawn picture of an orca on the bedside table, pushed aside to make room for Riker's favorite infrared-resistant cards. Riker followed his gaze and shrugged. When he wasn't speaking, the animation in his face disappeared and the sparkle in his eyes died. Every movement became listless. But when he *did* speak...

"When's the hearing?" he asked jovially, taking a seat on the unmade bed.

Picard raised an eyebrow.

"Insubordination," Riker reminded him. He studied Picard's face and gave a bashful smile. An affectation, Picard suspected. "I overrode your safety protocols. Isn't that why you're here?"

Picard's chest squeezed tight and something like liquid fire trickled into his rib cage. He sat down heavily in the visitor's chair. "William," he said, "you know that's not why I'm here."

Riker had the gall to look confused.

“My first officer tried to kill himself,” said Picard. “*That’s* why I’m here.”

Riker made a dismissive noise in the back of his throat.

“Counselor Troi tells me you’re still suicidal. She says you are in immense pain.”

“Me?” said Riker. He laid one hand on his chest and then grinned, his lips splitting into a wide, toothy smile. “Not on these drugs. Beverly gave me enough to sedate an elephant.”

“Beverly is trying to keep you alive.”

Riker’s eyes shunted to the side, focusing on his game of solitaire. Idly, he reached over and flipped a card.

“*Are* you suicidal, Will?” Picard pushed. “Is my first officer ready to die?”

Another card was flipped and placed in silence.

“Are you so eager for death that you cannot wait for the next away mission to throw yourself in harm’s way?” Picard asked. “Your usual recklessness will do the job quickly enough on its own. There is no need to expedite the process by a Shakespearean plunge into a river of one’s own making.”

At the word ‘reckless’, Riker froze. He snapped the last card into place, his jaw tight. And he sat up straight, with the posture of a first officer, and looked Picard in the eye. “I request a transfer,” he said.

“What?” Picard snapped.

“I request a transfer,” Riker said, voice even but hard. “Get me out of your hair — so to speak. It doesn’t have to be a command position—”

“It *won’t* be a command position,” Picard said. He shot to his feet and Riker bristled, baring his teeth. “You attempted suicide by drowning in a Starfleet holodeck. Commander Riker, that isn’t grounds for *transfer*. That is grounds for immediate admittance to the nearest psychiatric facility. You’ll be lucky to keep your pips even as souvenirs.”

The door slid open just as Picard realized, belatedly, that the way Riker bared his teeth and lowered his head was not a glare but a flinch. He stepped backward, a cold flush washing through him, and Troi reached through the open door and grabbed his arm.

“What are you doing?” she asked in a whisper as she pulled him outside.

“I’m getting through to him,” Picard snapped. Then he closed his eyes tight and shook his head. “I’m floundering,” he admitted.

Troi’s eyes were wide. She searched Picard’s face and glanced back into Riker’s private room, where he’d turned to face the wall. Riker’s shoulder blades stuck out through the thin fabric of his hospital pajamas, every muscle in his back a tight knot. As they watched, he raised one hand and rubbed at the back of his neck. Slow. Not like it hurt. Like he was shielding that vulnerable strip of flesh from a surprise attack.

“Be careful, Captain,” Troi said quietly. “I can sense his despair.”

“Well, he certainly isn’t showing it.” Picard released a short sigh. “Not while I’m in there with him. It’s all a joke to him.”

“What he feels and what he shows are two different things,” Troi said, eyes blazing now. She set her jaw and squeezed Picard’s arm tight. “Every word you say is feeding into Will’s self-hatred, Captain. He is convinced that he deserves this.”

“Deserves what?” said Picard in a furious whisper. “Deserves to die?”

“Deserves to be sent packing,” Troi corrected, and suddenly Picard understood. Of course. He’d always understood, really; he’d just let his concern blind him. From the moment he first met Riker he’d pegged that flyboy swagger as a facade. A very good one, solid enough to convince most everyone else on the Enterprise, but underneath it all was a still-nervous cadet vacillating wildly between overconfidence in his skills and a fear that all his accomplishments would collapse around him at the drop of a hat. Or everyone would decide one day that his commendations, his bravery, weren’t good enough. And they would leave.

“Advise me,” Picard whispered. He searched Troi’s face and let the ‘angry captain’ mask slip away. “What does he need?”

“From you?” Troi bit her lip. “He needs to drop the facade.”

“So he needs to feel safe.”

Troi shook her head. “If he feels safe ... when he feels safe, the mask just gets stronger. He’s had it on for too long. Every second that it goes unchallenged...”

“If you’re to tell me he needs ‘tough love’, then why did you pull me from his room?” said Picard gruffly.

Troi covered her face with her hands. Her fingers looked dry and fragile as twigs, her skin pale and her knuckles knobby. Like she hadn’t been eating much, either.

“I felt his distress,” she said, voice clipped. “I had to stop it. It was ... instinctive.”

She was as much at a loss as he was, Picard realized. Anxiety and anger were clouding their minds. But it was the duty of a Starfleet officer to

rise above it, so when Picard saw Troi steadying herself with a deep breath, he did the same.

"I understand," Picard said. He rested a broad hand on her shoulder and squeezed, forcing her to look him in the eye. "I'm sorry," he said, pouring every ounce of sincerity into it, letting her read him like a book.

"I know," Troi said, squaring her shoulders. She walled her emotions up and gave Picard a cool nod. "Go."

Tough love. By the time Picard returned to Riker's room, he was a Starfleet captain again, no-nonsense and brusque. He took a seat in the visitor's chair and crossed his legs. The regal bearing and placid expression of a diplomat settled onto his frame.

"You won't even defend yourself?" Picard asked. "Turn and face me, Will."

Riker swung around on the hospital bed. His features had settled into an amused but weary smile. "Already dispensing of the rank, I see," he said.

"Is this a laughing matter to you, Will?"

"No, sir."

"Then wipe the smile off your face."

It just got bigger. Riker stared Picard down with pained eyes and a rictus grin.

"I don't know who you are. Who you've become," said Picard in disgust, looking him up and down. "Self-injury. Suicide. This isn't the William Riker I knew."

Riker curled in on himself as if his stomach hurt. He shook his head, still smiling. From between his bared teeth there came a shaky laugh.

"Talk to me," Picard ordered.

"I'm fine, sir. It wasn't suicide. I was just going for a swim."

Picard deserved the Federation's highest honor for reining in his temper. He sucked in a slow, steadying breath and kept the color from rushing to his cheeks.

"I was just going for a swim," Riker repeated. He glanced up, lips twisted. Not exactly a smile. "I showed poor judgment, Captain. And I can no longer be trusted with a holodeck, so I can no longer be trusted on the bridge."

"Will—"

"Ground me," Riker said, swallowing the last sharp-edged remnants of his smile. He pursed his lips. Then he smiled again anyway, as if he couldn't help himself. "You'll never have to hear another trombone solo."

"Will, I'm not here to ground you," Picard said firmly. "I'm not here to punish you or institutionalize you or strip you of your hard-earned rank. Listen to me."

Riker ducked his head.

"Listen to me."

He still didn't look up. Picard's chest swelled as he took a deep breath.

"William," he said, struggling to keep his tone neutral, "your father lost his last appeal. While you were unconscious last night, the authorities on Risa had him castrated. Were you aware?"

Seconds ticked by in silence. Riker's hair hung in a tangle over his forehead, obstructing Picard's view of his face.

"No," he said softly. "I wasn't aware."

Picard uncrossed his legs and reached for his padd. "I accessed your childhood medical files from Valdez," he said. "The ones shown at your father's trial. They mirror your recent holodeck injuries remarkably well."

He let the implication sink in.

"I didn't injure myself on purpose," said Riker, finally defending himself.

"No?" Picard raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps not. But last night, you did step into the river of your own volition. Yes?"

Riker nodded. His hands were clenched tight on the edge of the bed. "So send me away," he said, his voice carefully neutral. A perfect match to Picard's.

"Is that a challenge, or a genuine request?"

"It's genuine," said Riker, a muscle jumping in his cheek. Picard studied him and then turned back to the file open on his padd.

"You've tried suicide before, haven't you," he said.

“No.”

Picard glanced up.

“No,” said Riker again, but he shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“When you were eight.”

“Not really,” Riker said.

Picard read straight from the file. “You were dropped off at the school gate by one of your uncles, a Mr. Shugak. Mr. Shugak did not stay to make sure you entered the school; he saw you approach the front door and drove away before you made it there. Once he was gone, you left your backpack in the playground and walked into the woods, is that correct? And there, you made yourself a little snow shelter, as you’d been taught in your survival classes, and you went to sleep.” He looked up and met Riker’s eyes. “You could have frozen to death.”

“I survived,” Riker said. Picard kept his face blank and watched the way Riker’s expression gradually changed. The lack of response was torturing him. “I’m sorry,” Riker said finally, checking Picard’s reaction to see if this was the right thing to say.

“Would you agree that this childhood attempt at freezing to death mirrors last night’s attempt at drowning?” Picard asked.

“But it wasn’t...” Riker cast his gaze around the room. “It wasn’t a suicide attempt. Either of them. I just...”

“Earlier, you said it was.”

“What do you want me to say?” Riker asked finally, a hint of frustration bleeding through.

But Picard gave him no hints. He turned his attention back to the padd. “At age ten you were admitted to the local medical clinic with internal tearing,” he said, and he had to compartmentalize the same way he did in battle, had to send his mind and his emotions far away so he could say those words without his voice shaking. It was an almost out-of-body experience as he met Riker’s eyes. “And at your father’s trial,” Picard forced himself to say, “the victim said your father called him Billy.”

Silence. Riker lifted his left shoulder in a shrug and then kept it up, the same nervous posture he had when he was agitated on the bridge, or deep in thought. His face wasn’t exactly blank. His eyes drifted slowly, down Picard’s body to his shoes, then over the tile floor.

“Will,” said Picard gently.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” said Riker, and now there was no hiding the misery in his voice. A tear slipped down his cheek, and he didn’t bother to wipe it away. Face working, voice cracked, he said, “What can I do?”

“Will...” Picard slid his chair closer and took Riker’s trembling hands in his own. “What do you mean? What can you do to what?”

“To make you stop,” Riker said, not meeting his eyes.

“Stop talking to you?” Picard asked.

Riker shook his head. The tears were falling faster now, his chin trembling. “Stop being mad,” he managed to say.

It was like a child’s voice. Picard heard it, and he couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t speak. He held Riker’s hands in his own, unsure what to say, and across from him Riker’s chest hitched in a shallow breath. He tried to turn away, to hide his reaction — damnably, Picard saw the start of a forced smile and knew in his bones that if he let Riker speak, the first thing he would say would be a joke, a desperate attempt to take everything back, to show that he was fine.

So Picard didn’t let him speak. He stood without letting go of Riker’s hands. He transferred his grip, slowly projecting every move, and guided Riker closer — until his face was hidden against Picard’s shoulder and his hands were clenched, weak but desperate, at either side of Picard’s waist. Riker didn’t lean into the hug any further than that; he wouldn’t let his chest or stomach touch Picard, flinched when Picard tried to pull him closer.

But he didn’t lean away, either.

Picard didn’t say a word. He thought of what he’d read in the file, what he’d heard at the trial, and he let Commander Riker cry.

Chapter 12

He was sitting by the holoscreen when she visited. Worf was supposed to be standing vigil on the other side of the room, but he'd taken a seat and now his arms were folded over his chest and his head was bowed — napping. At least Riker didn't seem to need much watching. His eyes were on the stars, and his fingers were worrying at the little orca card Deanna had left behind.

You've been crying, Deanna said.

He gave her a wan smile. *I still am,* he admitted with a flare of embarrassment, and only then did Deanna notice the tears on his cheeks. It wiped the tentative optimism right out of her. She sat down across from him at the little card table, close enough to touch.

Sorry, he said, sensing her sudden change of mood. He set the little orca aside and searched for the tissues Beverly had left him. It was strange to watch someone cry so silently, without expression, and even stranger to watch him mop the tears away as if they were nothing more than rainwater.

Do you remember asking for that? Deanna asked, nodding at the orca drawing.

She could tell he was smiling, even with the tissue covering most of his face. He shook his head.

You woke up briefly, she said. *You were ... very 'out of it,' as Beverly would say.*

I don't remember.

He'd asked for his father. Deanna didn't say so, and she made sure that information stayed locked up deep inside her head. He'd been so tired, so confused — and he'd smiled so warmly at the sight of her, kissed her hand, asked her, half-asleep, if she could call his father for him. *He'll need to know,* he insisted. *He'll want to know.*

But Deanna doubted that Kyle Riker had ever cared about his son's many hospitalizations. And now that Will was better, he would say the same thing. She took a deep breath and plastered a smile on her face.

You told me it was ugly in here, she said. Will's eyes softened in a smile. *You really had Beverly going, lambasting her about the sickbay artwork. Or lack thereof. And here I thought you hated art.*

She was thinking of Betazed, the museums they visited together when they were young, his loud complaints about abstract paintings. Will looked away with a light blush.

I never hated art, he admitted. *I was just trying to get a rise out of you.*

William Riker. Now, why would you do that?

He looked up at her from beneath his lashes. In his head, he saw — and *she* saw — the way she looked at him when she was angry. The spark of temper in her dark eyes, the high spots of color on her cheeks. Now Deanna was blushing too. His smile softened. She couldn't bear it, but she caught herself smiling in return.

Anyway, she said, unable to maintain eye contact much longer, *I offered to draw you something. To spruce up the place.*

I knew this had to be you, he said, tracing the orca. Deanna watched his finger hover over the dark ink strokes. *No one else would know.*

Well, you requested it. I asked you what I should draw, and you said ... an orca. And then you pictured one, so strongly that I could see it in my mind.

Will stared at the drawing, his eyes hooded and warm. He touched its fins, the smear of ink by its tail. In his head there was a vision of a cold Alaskan cliffside and dizzying heights, the roar of the ocean far below. He could almost hear a girl at his side, his best friend Rosie, saying, *Isn't it almost time for you to go home, Will? Won't your dad be worried?* The longer he stared at the drawing, the more his expression fractured. He lifted the soggy ball of tissue to wipe his eyes again.

Sorry, he said, his chest stuttering. Deanna's heart ached just as much as his did.

Why are you crying? she asked.

I don't know. I'm not upset. He took a ragged breath and put the tissue away. *I'm fine.*

You're not fine, Will. She brushed her pinky finger against his thumb. She could have gone on at length about why he was crying — or her theories, at least — and why it was normal. But he wasn't willing to hear. Too embarrassed. So all she said was, *Maybe you just need to cry for a while. Sometimes that's all it takes.*

He nodded, but he couldn't meet her eyes.

In the morning, it was Worf who woke Commander Riker to take his vitals. He'd subbed out during the night with one of the medics, but he was back in time to watch Riker sleep a little longer, his head hidden beneath the blankets. Maybe just to block out the soft light from the hall. Or maybe to protect himself, but Worf wasn't sure Riker's instincts as a warrior were quite honed enough to reach the level of nighttime camouflage.

"Sir," Worf said, his voice a level rumble, loud enough to wake Riker without touching him. The blankets shifted. Squinting, rubbing at his eyes, Riker emerged from beneath the covers.

"What time is it?" he mumbled.

"Zero-four," Worf said.

With a groan, Riker flopped back onto his mattress and rolled away.

"If you resist, I will have no choice but to use force," Worf said.

Riker shot him a suspicious look over his shoulder. "Resist what?"

The doors slid open and Dr. Crusher stepped inside, looking eerily refreshed for how early it was. "We need to take your vitals, Will," she said, tucking her hands into her pockets. "Normally a medic would do this, but I wanted to check on you myself."

"Oh." He sat up with some difficulty, and Worf could tell in an instant that he was dizzy. He reached out and put a steadying hand on Riker's shoulder.

"Feet over the side of the bed," Dr. Crusher ordered.

Riker obeyed. Worf didn't let go of him. The handheld scanner beeped as Dr. Crusher waved it over Riker's body from head to toe.

"Your blood pressure is still low," she noted.

"Get me some coffee and it'll shoot back up."

Dr. Crusher gave him a look and tucked her scanner away. She put her palm over Riker's forehead, brushing back the messy tufts of hair. His eyes slid closed at her touch.

"You're slightly feverish," Dr. Crusher said. "But that's normal, too. You'll need another day before you start to feel like yourself again." She met Worf's eyes and shrugged slightly. "That's hypothermia for you."

"Can I sleep now?" asked Riker, his eyes still closed.

"Sleep," Dr. Crusher said.

He fell backward, over-exaggerating his own weariness, and let his legs flop into place on the mattress. He didn't bother with the covers at first ... but after Beverly left and Worf resumed his station, Riker slowly crossed his arms, tension mounting in his body. Then, surreptitiously, he untangled the blankets from beneath him and covered his face again. There was no sound but the quiet hiss of machinery and Riker's even, shallow breathing.

Then that breathing hitched. It continued at a stuttering pace until it stopped entirely. A minute and thirty seconds ticked by before Riker let his breath out in a shaky sigh. Beneath the covers, he turned his head and muffled all sounds against his own arm.

Klingon honor dictated that Worf should leave. Starfleet honor dictated that he stay. He stood at stiff attention, unsure what to do. What to say. In the end, when all words tangled in his throat and died on his tongue, he crossed to the speaker and selected a soft track of weak-sounding Earth music to play. The sound swallowed up all hint of Riker's tears. He could cry now, without worrying too much if Worf could hear him. And Worf could relax a little, without the uncomfortable anxiety of listening to his commanding officer stifle his tears.

The music played, ugly and clashing and insufferable, for nearly thirty minutes. It was some terrible Earth musician called 'Ravel.' Barely digestible. But Worf endured it, and when one song softened and petered out to make way for the next, he realized that Riker's breathing was no longer quite so harsh or ragged. Beneath the blankets, Riker wiped his eyes and sighed.

"Thank you, Worf," he said, almost inaudible.

Worf, of course, did not reply.

"Will."

He clearly had her knock memorized, because he was already giving her a long-suffering look before Beverly even said his name.

"You give me any more tests and I'm going to start charging," Riker said. His dinner sat before him, largely untouched. The tray was pushed back to make way for his deck of cards.

"No more tests," Beverly promised. He'd completed all her psych questionnaires with a bare minimum of complaining — and since it was Will, she would gladly forget the brief tears of frustration and shame. He looked better now. Still thin, still pale, but not so close to the edge. "May I?" Beverly asked, brushing her notes against the empty chair.

Will nodded, and she took a seat. She gathered the cards up without asking and tapped them into a neat pile.

"We can play a game, if you like," she said, cutting the deck. With her elbow, she pushed Will's food closer to him. "I'm free for an hour."

"You're free?" He gave a disbelieving snort.

"Well, let me rephrase." She started to shuffle and shot him a tiny smile. "I have an hour blocked off to talk to you about what comes next. We

can do that while playing a round of Sivic, no?"

"Definitely," he said with unvarnished enthusiasm. He even took a bite of the bland nausea-mediating food Beverly had ordered for him. "You deal."

Beverly obliged. Sivic wasn't her game of choice, but it was fun and easy to scale down to only two players. It didn't require much strategic thought, either, so she and Will could chat while keeping their hands occupied.

"One more day," Beverly told him. "Then you're free to go."

He nodded, his face a pleasant mask. "Back to duty, or..."

"Back to duty," Beverly told him. "Here, Will. On the Enterprise."

His expression wavered, but he gave another casual nod and checked his cards.

"Captain Picard wants you to take four days of leave first," Beverly said. "It's optional, but we both recommend it."

"What for?"

"Rest, mostly," Beverly said. Will put down his first card and she checked the suit before placing one of her own on top, at a perpendicular angle. "You have a lot of sleep — and a lot of missed meals — to catch up on. And we'd like you to start seeing a counselor."

A shadow crossed his face.

"Not Deanna," Beverly said.

"Oh." He scrubbed at his beard with the heel of his palm. "Well, that makes sense."

"Indeed." Beverly laid down her next card and then reached into her lab coat for a disc. This she tossed to Will, and he let it clack against his tray. "That's a file on Dr. Macnair. He'll be treating you remotely, via subspace communication."

"Federation guy?"

"Civilian," Beverly said. "He comes highly recommended."

"By whom?"

"By Deanna."

Will digested this and slipped the disc to the side. He studied his cards as if he'd already forgotten what was in his hand.

"So really, I'm taking four days of leave so I can start therapy," he said, voice neutral.

"You will have sessions during your leave, yes." Beverly paused. "But I meant it, Will, when I said those days are for rest. It's just that, for your first few sessions..."

"I may not be fit for duty afterward," Will finished for her. A stormy expression tugged at his lips and eyebrows. "I know what you mean."

"It's not just you, if that helps," Beverly said. "Asking someone to complete a midday therapy session and then return straight to work — as if nothing happened? That's cruel."

Will made a dismissive noise in the back of his throat and shrugged. "When do I meet this guy?"

"Tonight, if you're up for it. And if you don't like him—"

"I like everybody," said Will with an air of guilty concession, as if he felt bad for making her explain. He meant it, too; Beverly could tell, so she didn't push the subject. Will gave her a sheepish smile. "I'm sure it'll be fine. I'm sorry."

"For what?" Beverly asked.

"For interrogating you," Will said. "For being difficult."

"You're not d—"

He looked like the end of that sentence might be tantamount to torture. Beverly caught herself, but she didn't have time to think of a good way to change the subject. Luckily, Will was one step ahead of her. He slapped a winning card down on top of hers, his face a cheerful mask again.

"And I'm sorry for absolutely *devastating* you at Sivic," he said.

His first session with Dr. Macnair took place just after dinner. Riker sat alone in his room with his back to the door. From outside, anyone looking in could see Dr. Macnair's long, thin face and the gentle expression in his eyes. But no one could see Riker's. Just the tension in his shoulders, the tight grip of his fingers on his own arms. He nodded his head occasionally. Sometimes he shook it.

Glancing in, Beverly couldn't be sure if he ever said a single word.

Chapter 13

"It's just a little light reading," Riker insisted.

Worf's nostrils flared. "You informed me not five minutes ago of a severe headache. *Sir.*"

Riker squinted at Worf. The lights were dim and the holoscreen was darkened to a gentle swirl of navy blue, but still, he had to squint. "I'm telling you *now* that I can handle it," he said. "It might help."

"It will not help," said Worf firmly.

"I'm dying of boredom here," Riker complained. "If I take one of those pain relievers, will you let me read?"

Now Worf hesitated. It was the wording, Riker suspected. "Let me." That would imply Worf had taken an inappropriate authority over his commanding officer. His Klingon honor wouldn't let that stand. Reluctantly, Worf tapped his communicator.

"Headache reliever to Commander Riker's room," he muttered. Then, to Riker, "May I review your reading material, sir?"

"No," said Riker, glacially calm.

Silence. Worf blinked, taken aback. The doors slid open and a medic walked inside, briskly delivering a cup of water and a handful of capsules to Riker.

"He has eaten very little today," Worf warned him.

"This is a low dose," said the medic. But when Riker had swallowed the pills, the medic came back with a packet of biscuits and another cup, this one filled with some sort of bright pink, vaguely sludgy beverage.

"Appetizing," Riker commented.

"It will alleviate your nausea, sir," the medic said. "I'll return in ten minutes for your trash."

Riker dismissed him with a nod. He crushed the packet of biscuits without opening it — which struck Worf as a very strong, Klingon-esque thing to do — and then poured the crumbs into his pink drink. Which struck Worf as a very sneaky way to hide how many biscuits he'd actually eaten.

"What are you reading?" Worf asked, modifying his strategy somewhat. Riker lit up his private padd.

"Thanks for framing it as a question, I guess. I'm reading the news from Risa."

Worf shifted from foot to foot.

"Keep your disapproval to yourself, Mr. Worf," said Riker, his eyes twinkling. "I can handle it."

Well, Worf thought — if he let Riker have this, then maybe Riker would drink the pink sludge. The first officer at least had a strong transactional sense of favors. He'd listened to Worf's Klingon instruments dutifully, despite a clear, masked distaste for the noise, all because Worf had listened patiently to the ghastly trombone. So Worf settled into a ready position at the door, his feet spread to shoulder width and his hands folded behind his back, and he let Riker read.

Ten minutes ticked by. Riker sipped at the pink sludge and consumed perhaps 1/3 of it by the time the medic returned to whisk the crumpled biscuit wrapper away. The glow of his padd lit up Riker's face and illuminated the stress lines between his brows and at the corner of each eye.

Worf had heard, of course, about Kyle Riker's crimes. Most of the Enterprise knew. The children, or at least those in Alexander's age range, had a skewed view of it — they'd been told, perhaps by protective older siblings, that Kyle Riker wasn't related to their first officer, and anyway, he was framed, and actually, the crime was drug-related. Worf had seen no reason thus far to divest Alexander of his illusions.

He wished he could change Commander Riker's perception of the trial that easily.

"Any news, sir?" Worf asked, voice low. Just to fill the silence.

Riker's expression smoothed out. "Were you following the trial?"

"Not closely," Worf said, his shoulders stiff.

"But you know the basics?"

Would it do any good to lie? Probably not, Worf decided, studying Riker's face.

"I do," he said aloud.

Riker glanced up — just a brief flicker of the eyes, then he went back to his padd. "He's been chemically castrated," he said neutrally. "He lost his appeal."

They were dancing around the exact reason why Riker was here. Why he'd been found, soaking wet and half-drowned, in the holodeck, with Counselor Troi trying desperately to wake him up. Whatever had happened on Risa, in that courtroom, had started all of this. Riker's decreased

appetite, his frenetic push for more sessions in the holodeck, his awkward excuses for why he couldn't play in Ten-Forward — what exactly had he testified to?

Across from Worf, Riker was staring blankly at the screen. He'd scrolled down through the latest news. Now, reflected on the holoscreen behind him, Worf could see what looked like trial transcripts, too blurry for him to read from the door. Riker rested his chin on his hand. Gradually, his face closed off and his eyes went far away, no longer reading.

"Worf?" he said finally, his voice small.

An uneasy tingle spread over Worf's forehead ridges. "Sir?"

"Don't you have a kid to see to?" asked Riker mildly, still staring at the screen.

As the humans would say: *Oh hell no.*

"I am not leaving you alone," said Worf firmly. His tone got Riker's attention, if only in a vague sense. He glanced over at Worf, a little startled, and said,

"Ease down, soldier. I'm not asking to be alone. I just..." He glanced back at the screen and his shoulders slumped. "Someone else. Go be with your son."

Worf hesitated, his abs flexing in anticipation of a fight. "Counselor Troi..." he started.

"Someone else."

Who else was there? Worf scanned through the vanishingly small visitation list in his head. "Commander Data," he said finally.

"Data?" Riker blinked. He stared off into the distance. Then he shrugged. "Fine. If he's willing."

"A medic will watch you in the meantime."

"Also fine." Riker lifted his pink sludge and gave it a sniff, his nose wrinkling. Then he gulped it down in one long swallow and clinked the empty glass against the table. As if to say, *'Look, I finished it. Do me a solid and I'll do you one too.'*

Transactional. Like Worf said.

"I'll go with you," Geordi said as soon as the communication came through.

Data blinked, his face expressionless as always. "That will not be necessary. Lieutenant Worf requested only one visitor."

"I know it's not necessary. But I want to come." Geordi rubbed his index finger against his thumb in a nervous gesture that immediately — and regrettably — caught Data's attention. His golden eyes zeroed in on Geordi's hands.

"You are anxious to see Commander Riker," he said.

Geordi took a deep breath. Two images warred in his head: that dark, sparse room and the faint smell of vomit, the warmth of Riker's hand against his own. And then the sickbay, bright and stark, and Riker lying unconscious in the biobed, his cheeks hollowed out.

"He's my friend," Geordi said finally. "I want to see how he's doing."

Data's features quirked, the expression he always got when he didn't fully understand something but was eager to observe. He dipped his head in a birdlike nod. "Then, after you."

Commander Riker was lying in bed when Data and Geordi arrived — but he wasn't sleeping. He lifted his arm away from his eyes when they came in.

"This is a pleasant surprise," he said, looking Geordi up and down.

Not for the first time, Geordi was grateful to have his VISOR. To the unaided eye, Riker was unreadable. He could call up a convincing smile at the drop of a hat. He could smooth out any hint of trouble in his tone. But beneath the skin, his heart was pounding and his muscles were tight.

That wasn't right. Geordi didn't want him to be embarrassed. He floundered a little, managing only an awkward nod, and let Data take the floor.

"Lieutenant Commander Worf tells me you require companionship," Data said primly. He unloaded the box beneath his arm and set it on the card table. "I have brought a game for you."

"Oh?" Riker swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "I have cards, you know."

Data slid the box open and popped out the layers of boards needed for tri-dimensional chess. Riker's face lit up.

"Don't get too excited, Commander," Geordi warned. "You've never played against an android before. It's demoralizing."

"You kidding me?" said Riker, delighted. "Data and I play all the time."

Geordi shot Data a scandalized look that went utterly unnoticed. With efficient and precise movements, Data set up the chessboards, his hands a blur. "Commander Riker is quantifiably better-skilled as a chess player than as a trombonist," Data said. "I find our matches highly rewarding."

"Hey," said Riker, wounded.

"I insulted your trombone skills, sir, in an effort to cause an emotional imbalance," Data explained, "thereby giving myself an advantage. Your move."

Riker affected a great deal of turmoil before he slid his pawn into the standard first position. When Data wasn't looking, he gave Geordi a wink. *Well*, Geordi thought, *this might take some time*. He found a chair and parked himself some distance away, close enough to watch but not so close he was distracting. From here he could survey Riker as well as the room in general.

It didn't look very cozy. Then again, that was probably a good thing. If it were cozy, that would mean Dr. Crusher was keeping Riker here long-term. As it was, he had only a few personal items and some extra blankets. Geordi fiddled with a music speaker and studied Riker's saved files. Purcell, Scarlatti, Vivaldi, Telemann — all kinds of Baroque but hardly any jazz. Geordi raised an eyebrow at that and selected some Duke Ellington.

"Good choice," said Riker at once, his eyes still on the chessboard.

"It's your music, sir. I just picked the file."

Riker shrugged this off and made his next move. He really had no hope of beating Data, but he was putting up a good fight. And evidently, he liked the challenge. It had been months, Geordi realized, since he saw Riker like this: eyes sparkling, but relaxed. In the past ninety days or so, Riker had been subtly off: tense or dull-eyed or both at the same time. And Geordi was kicking himself that he hadn't noticed until now.

"Are you enjoying sickbay, Commander?" Data asked in his smooth, toneless voice.

Riker barked out a laugh. "Is that another attempt to throw me off my game?"

"It is a genuine question, sir. It is only a lucky happenstance that my query also doubles as a taunt."

"Data," said Geordi, exasperated.

"No, it's okay, you can taunt me," said Riker. He bit back a chuckle and shook his head. "I'm — I'm not exactly—"

Data slowly looked up from the chessboard. Unblinking, he studied Riker's face. And eventually, when the words wouldn't come, Riker gave up with an amiable shrug. He made his next move too quickly, but he didn't take his fingers off the rook. Instead, with a half-smile, he moved it back to position.

"You got me," he said softly. "That one worked."

"I suspected it might," Data said. "However, it was not one hundred percent effective, as you did not commit to a hasty move."

Riker shook his head again. He gave Data a quick, fond look. "What about you?" he asked — not as a taunt. "How does it suit you, being first officer?"

A dark cloud passed over Data's face. Really, it was just his 'concentration' face, but Geordi was used to ascribing human emotions to Data and didn't really care to stop.

"It is ... at times, puzzling," Data admitted. "I have run into several obstacles already."

"Such as?" asked Riker.

"Counselor Troi informs me you are 'the family man' in juxtaposition to Captain Picard's 'stern authoritarian' persona," Data said. Riker blinked at the description, then swallowed a smile. "I am not a family man," Data said.

"Has that been an issue for you so far?"

"Yes," said Data gravely. "Because Counselor Troi informs me the term 'family man' is not literal and means only that I must be a friend and emotional support for the crew. I was under the impression this was Counselor Troi's duty. I am not prepared, as first officer, to be counselor as well."

Riker hesitated with his fingers on a pawn. "Well, the first officer's job is a lot more casual than that," he said. "As Picard's first officer, I try to be friendly with everyone. Encouraging. People need to feel like they can trust and confide in their superiors, and Captain Picard feels as though he doesn't fit that role."

Data said nothing. He was gravely studying Riker's face.

"But it's an individual thing, Data," Riker told him. "The first officer and the captain complement each other. If you're not suited to one aspect of command, then your captain will either train you for it or fill that role himself. Understand?"

"Captain Picard is unable to fill this role," said Data at once.

"Why don't you tell me what happened," Riker suggested, "and we can figure it out together?"

Data processed this. He processed the chessboards at the same time, a light furrow appearing between his eyebrows. "I was engaging in 'free time' in Ten-Forward last night," he said, "when an Ensign Peeler approached me with an emotional problem."

"I'm familiar with Ensign Peeler," Riker said.

"She expressed a great deal of worry over a fellow officer," Data said. "I could neither divulge information on this officer's health nor persuade her that her worries were unfounded."

He made his move, and Riker responded at once, taking Data's pawn down to the lowest level.

"I struggled with this, too, when I was a lieutenant," Riker said. "I remember studying the philosophical texts of Betazed and working myself into a frenzy over them. They'd ask a question like, 'What do you do if a crewman approaches you with a complaint about her supervisor?' My instinct told me to assess the situation as a commander. Figure out if the complaint was justified, then tell my crewman to adjust her behavior. Or, if it weren't justified, advise my crewman to keep her head low and make sure other people witnessed her good work."

"Logical," Data said.

"But the Betazoid teaching said I shouldn't offer *any* solutions," Riker said. He folded his arms on the table and studied the chessboards. "It said the crewman should come to her own conclusions. My role was to validate her emotions and assure her she wasn't alone."

Data frowned.

"I know," said Riker with a grin. "I don't fully agree either. That's why I don't exactly do it the Betazoid way. I integrate. I listen, I empathize, *and* I offer solutions ... and then I check up on my crewman to make sure the situation is solved."

"A simple formula for success," said Data appreciatively.

"Yes."

"Then I will tell her it is acceptable to worry," Data said, "and I will advise her to visit you here in sickbay. And then, in one day, I will ask if she feels better."

Riker looked like he'd swallowed a sour grape at the revelation that Ensign Peeler was worried for him. But he nodded, hesitating over his next move. "Let me know how it goes," Riker said. He started to move his pawn, paused over the square, moved it back, then just went for it, past the point of caring. "What did she say?"

"She expressed several different sentiments," said Data blithely. "In total, Ensign Peeler and I exchanged 10,643 words. Would you like a full record of the conversation?"

"No. Just ..." Riker's eyes flickered to Geordi. His expression cracked into a self-conscious smile. "Well, call me egotistical, but I'm a little curious. What did she say about me?"

"She expressed great concern for your health," said Data at once. Geordi shifted, sensing another moment of brutal honesty on the horizon. "Ensign Peeler has heard rumors that you attempted suicide."

Riker tapped a bishop's base against the chessboard, his expression unreadable. His heart rate and breathing were both slow.

"Were you there?" Riker asked, turning to Geordi. Geordi straightened up a little.

"No. I—"

"Was she—" Riker cut himself off and glanced at Geordi. When Geordi gestured for him to go on, he gave a gracious little nod. "Did she say anything else, Data?"

Data ran back through the conversation in his head. "She said, 'Hello, Data. Can I speak to you?' She paused and added, after zero-point-three seconds, 'Alone?' I said, 'Of course, Ensign. I am otherwise unoccupied at the moment.' She said, 'You are acting first officer now, right?' I said, 'Yes, I am.' She said, 'Is Commander Riker okay?' I said—"

"Data," said Geordi, gently interrupting, "I don't think the commander needs a play-by-play."

Data cocked his head. Riker's breathing was a little elevated now, his eyes fixed dully on the chessboards.

"Let me swap in," Geordi said to Data. "I haven't played chess in ages."

Data ceded his seat without a fuss. Geordi made himself comfortable, studied the chessboard, and glanced over his shoulder.

"You should probably get back to the bridge," he said to Data.

Data opened his mouth to protest — then closed it, eyebrows raised. "Ah," he said. "A subtle dismissal. I understand." He turned on his heel and left, and Geordi shot Riker an apologetic smile.

"Don't apologize for him," said Riker roughly, rubbing his chest. "There's nothing to apologize for."

"I could've stepped in earlier."

"No need." Riker made a show of studying the chessboards, but Geordi wasn't convinced he really saw anything. "I like talking to Data. I don't need to be rescued."

"I know, sir." Geordi hesitated. It was his turn, so he moved a chess piece more or less at random. "I've heard people talking, too. They're worried about you."

Riker ran his fingers through his hair and kept his eyes down.

"But it's more than just being worried," Geordi continued. He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Hey. Would you agree that humans, even Starfleet officers, are at base ... kind of self-centered?"

That startled a snort of laughter out of Riker. "I didn't take you for a cynic," he said.

"I'm not. I don't think there's anything *wrong* with being self-centered." Geordi paused. "It's human nature, and human nature is ... it's beautiful, to me. But you know what I mean. If you ask a kid to pick out a birthday gift for his mom, what's he gonna pick? Something that he likes. And if you tell an ensign to pick a playlist for the party, what's he gonna put together? It's all gonna be music he personally enjoys. It might be adjusted to reflect what he thinks everyone else likes too, but he's not gonna choose any songs he hates, right? No matter how popular they are."

"What are you getting at, Geordi?" Riker asked.

Geordi pursed his lips. "Everyone *is* worried for you. But more than that, they miss you."

Riker's left eye narrowed in a squint.

"They miss what you *provide*," Geordi explained. "Live music in Ten-Forward. A first officer they can confide in. Someone who remembers all the birthdays and funerals. Do you know what Ten-Forward is like without you there?"

"I'll politely decline to answer."

"It's *boring*," Geordi said. "How many people can honestly say that their shipboard lounge gets *more* relaxed when the first officer is there? *That's* what people miss, Will. And that's what they're worried about, really. It's not that they think you're fragile, or they need to be careful around you. And it's definitely not that they're judging you for what happened. It's that, if they lose you, their lives get a whole lot less fun."

Riker's eyes twinkled. "Geordi, this would be profoundly discomfoting for most people. You realize that, right?"

"You're not most people," said Geordi. "And it's your move."

Riker glanced down at the chessboards and slid his queen out of position. "Data set you up for failure," he remarked as he put Geordi in check. He glanced over the remaining pieces and sighed. "The lesson here is that no one's really thinking too hard about me. They're thinking about themselves."

"Right," said Geordi.

"So I shouldn't be so damn uptight about it," Riker said. "Do you play chess often?"

"No," Geordi admitted.

Riker nodded, as if he'd suspected as much, and tapped a corner on the far-left board, the one closest to Geordi. "You can get out of this in a few moves if you put your rook there."

The first step to a solution. Geordi could figure the rest out on his own, with a little thought. He moved his rook and sat back with a sigh. "There are exceptions, of course," he said.

"Captain Picard," Riker acknowledged without emotion. "Counselor Troi. Probably Worf."

"The people closest to you," Geordi agreed. "They're actually worried. Not just for selfish reasons. But the rest ... so long as they get what they want — which is you, safe and sound and ready to party — then they won't think too hard about what got you here. Or whether you're ready to leave."

Riker nodded again, but now he looked a little troubled. He chased Geordi around the fourth chessboard for a bit, each of them moving their rooks one square at a time.

"What if I'm not?" Riker said.

Geordi just looked at him.

"What if I'm not fun anymore?" Riker asked. "Or nice? What if I start forgetting the birthdays and funerals? Stop telling jokes, stop playing the trombone?"

"So what if you do?" Geordi asked. "Captain Picard doesn't do any of that."

"He's a competent leader. I'm..."

"You're what?" asked Geordi flatly. "Are you really gonna tell me you're not a competent leader?"

Riker gave him an exaggerated *mea culpa* look. "I'm sorry you had to find out this way."

"I've been on away missions with you, sir. If you're incompetent then *I* might as well resign."

Riker laughed a little. He put Geordi in check again and ran a hand through his hair. "I don't really get it," he admitted. "I don't get how they can miss me for being fun, but ... still care, if I'm not..."

Geordi let him work it out. He focused on the chessboards while Riker lapsed into silence. Finally, Riker shook his head.

"You're fun, too," he said to Geordi.

"And here I thought you liked me for my big brain, sir."

Riker's eyes crinkled. The smile itself was small and almost shy. "I mean, you get it. The aspect of command that Data doesn't quite understand. You're a natural."

"Thank you, sir," said Geordi, and he meant it.

"And if you lost that natural talent," Riker continued, and he stopped to take a steadying breath, and only then did Geordi realize that this was difficult for him to say. "If you lost it, everyone would still value you. Not just as an engineer."

"Good to hear," said Geordi, keeping his tone neutral. "I think you have me in check again, sir. But you didn't say so."

Riker grimaced, as if he hadn't even noticed until now. "Sorry. It's checkmate, actually. I should have said."

"It's alright." Beneath the table, Geordi stretched his legs out. He peered through his VISOR at Riker's vitals. A bit better now. And Riker's features had settled into something more peaceful, less tense. There was still the bridge crew to contend with. Troi, who everyone knew had something going on with Riker — she would be a tough one to face. And Picard; Riker had to be at least a little anxious about facing him again, though if Geordi knew Picard at all, it would probably turn out okay. There was Worf, too — who knew how much he knew, or what his thoughts were, or if he'd even respect Riker as a commanding officer after this. Geordi was willing to bet he would, but for Riker, it would take some time — and lots of evidence — before he accepted Worf's respect.

Then...

Then there was Geordi. The one Riker had asked to stay. And again Geordi saw the darkened bedroom and the dripping hair, and felt Riker's hot skin against his own. He could still see a lingering sense of shame in Riker's eyes over that. He felt more than a little shame himself, because he hadn't known — hadn't realized. But there was an easy fix.

Beneath the table, Geordi nudged Riker's foot with his own. Initiated casual touch. Showed him it was okay.

"You alright?" he asked.

Riker looked at him, a little dazed. "I'm fine," he said. Then he blinked and seemed to remember where he was. "You can go, Geordi. Just send a medic in. I'm not supposed to be—"

He cut himself off, and Geordi pretended not to hear. He left the chessboards for Riker, and the music playing. When he left, a medic took his place, and Riker was still sitting at the card table watching the navy blue swirl of color on the holoscreen. Gradually, Riker's eyes drifted to his padd, to the file on his father. Chemically castrated and released to the Federation, a marked man.

Something in Riker's chest loosened. He turned the padd off with a vicious flick of his thumb and turned to study the medic. Petty Officer Texar, fidgeting nervously, no doubt remembering the trick Riker played on him when he asked for his grandmother's quilt. Guilt and a little affection joined the melting feeling in Riker's chest. He cleared the boards and rearranged the pieces, searching for a way to make amends.

"Do you play chess?" Riker asked.

Chapter 14

Winter, 2341

Mr. Merculief was a runner, so he ate a lot. He always loaded up with two entire school lunches, plus a massive sandwich he brought from home and sometimes a bag of chips that all the students eyed in not-so-secret envy. Sometimes he shared, but to the class's consternation, he only ever shared with the "bad kids."

So when Mr. Merculief offered the bag of chips to Will Riker after school one day, he knew he had to be bad, too.

"What, you don't like barbecue?" Mr. Merculief asked.

Shame-faced, Will reached into the bag and took a single chip, feeling like he'd been branded. There was no one here to see — everyone else's parents had picked them up already — but still.

"Are you waiting for Mr. Shugak?" asked Mr. Merculief.

"No," said Will. He turned to face the window and looked out into the parking lot, munching his single barbecue chip as quietly as he could. He would let his saliva soften the chip up before he chewed it, that way it was silent. "My dad is back," Will said finally. "He's supposed to pick me up."

"Do you have his comm number?" asked Mr. Merculief.

"He wouldn't answer."

"Let's try it anyway," said Mr. Merculief cheerfully. He readied his communicator, an old-fashioned one with a grubby keypad, and Will dutifully recited the code. The communicator beeped and beeped, searching for an answer. But nothing came.

"Hi, Mr. Riker," said Mr. Merculief in a bright voice, leaving a message. "This is Rich Merculief. I'm the 4th-grade teacher and latchkey supervisor at Will's school. Give me a call back when you're outside."

Will's face darkened. He wouldn't have phrased the last sentence that way, as an order. But there was nothing he could do about it now. Mr. Merculief ended the call and searched Will's face.

"What grade are you in, Will?" he asked. "First?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you like games?" Mr. Merculief asked. "I have some games in my classroom. Checkers. Chess."

"I like chess," said Will.

"Well, why don't we go play a game while we wait for your father to show up?"

Mr. Merculief started off down the hallway, expecting Will to follow him.

"I'm not very good," Will said as he rushed to catch up.

"I'm not very good, either," Mr. Merculief said. And it was so startling to hear a grown-up admit this that Will nearly stumbled over his own feet. Mr. Merculief opened the door to the fourth-grade classroom and flipped on the lights. The desks were the same as the ones in Will's classroom — scuffed and graffitied. But in the back of the room there was a bookcase stuffed with adventure and mystery paperbacks and scratched-up reading pads, and a low table stocked with board games, and a set of beanbag chairs, too. Mr. Merculief cleared off the table and set up a dusty little checkerboard.

"Oh," said Will.

Mr. Merculief looked up, one eyebrow raised, even as he continued placing the white chess pieces on the board. "Oh?" he said,

Will blushed. He reached for the zipper on his jacket and ran it up and down the teeth. "It's ... just one board?" he said.

For a long moment, Mr. Merculief didn't answer. Then, in a voice Will couldn't read, he said, "Do you usually play chess with more than one board, Will?"

Will wished he'd said nothing. "There's usually three big ones," he said. "And two little ones, way up high."

Mr. Merculief nodded slowly. "That's called tri-dimensional chess," he said.

Will already knew that, but he'd learned not to say 'I know' to adults.

"Do you play that yourself, Will, or have you seen someone else playing it?" asked Mr. Merculief.

Was he not allowed to play it? Maybe you had to be thirteen. Like anbo-jyutsu. Will gave a faux-cheerful shrug.

"My dad plays it," he said lightly. "I thought it looked cool."

It wasn't a lie. It was just an omission, and adults never noticed omissions. Mr. Merculief folded himself into one of the child-sized beanbag chairs, his long legs engulfing the table.

"Black or white?" he asked Will, gesturing toward the board.

"Black."

"White goes first," Mr. Merculief said.

"Yes, sir. I'll be black." Will settled into the seat with his feet curled up beneath him, secretly elated that they were sitting in beanbags, not in the uncomfortable wooden chairs from class. He mostly liked school, but it lasted way too long, and the chairs were the worst part. You had to sit straight in them or you got yelled at, no matter how much your body hurt — but no one could yell at you for sitting 'wrong' in a beanbag. He watched as Mr. Merculief made his first move, jumping over the line of pawns with his knight.

That was a hasty move. The sort of move you made when your opponent had no experience and you expected to beat them quickly. Will blinked, a little stung by the unspoken insult. He moved his pawn forward two slots to open up the board.

"Your pawn?" Mr. Merculief said. "Not your knight? Isn't the knight a little cooler?"

Will said nothing. Mr. Merculief studied his face, then moved his knight again, sideways this time. It was the sort of move Will would have made when he was four. One more move, and if your opponent was stupid, you could take his queen.

"Don't baby me," Will said, his temper flaring.

Mr. Merculief blinked. "I'm sorry?"

Instead of answering, Will just slid his pawn diagonally and took the knight. He deposited it on his side of the board with a loud clack.

"Now, why did you do that?" Mr. Merculief asked, sitting back in his seat.

"Because you think I can't picture where the knight is going," said Will, a little irritated. "If you moved it sideways again, you could've got my queen."

Mr. Merculief gazed at him thoughtfully. "You can visualize that?"

"It's how I used to beat other kids," Will said. "When I was little."

"I thought you said you weren't very good at chess," said Mr. Merculief mildly. "If you can visualize the knight's moves that easily, it tells me you should be playing tri-dimensional."

Will's cheeks burned. He lowered his head, his stomach suddenly a tight knot. "I'm *not* good," he muttered.

He didn't say it, but he'd used that one-two-three knight move on Mrs. Shugak too. He hadn't realized she was letting him win. Not until his father came home and Will requested a game, expecting to dazzle him. Will rested his cheek on his fist with a sigh. He was even worse at tri-dimensional. The moves confused him and he couldn't keep track of the little boards. It had been a whole year and he still hadn't beaten the simulator, even on the easiest setting.

"Do you still want to play?" Mr. Merculief asked.

Will didn't. But he knew better than to tell an adult 'no.' And it was snowing outside, and if he knew Kyle Riker, it would be well past dark before his dad arrived. So he sat back and squared his shoulders, and he put his happy face back on, and he nodded.

"Let's start over," Mr. Merculief said. He tacked the chess pieces back into place. "Your teacher tells me you're a bright kid."

Will said nothing, waiting for the catch. He still felt like he was somehow in trouble.

"I heard you took some tests last week," Mr. Merculief said.

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me about them."

This time, Mr. Merculief made a proper first move, nothing showy.

"There was an algebra test," Will said reluctantly. "And a sort of science experiment, and one about made-up languages. I had to guess what the pictures might mean. They gave me rules to help it make sense."

"Like, if this picture of a penguin means 'jump', and this polar bear means 'swim', what might this picture of a fox mean?" Mr. Merculief asked.

So he knew the test. Will gave a single nod.

"You took some other tests, too," Mr. Merculief said.

"Those were just normal tests. No puzzles."

"How did you do on them?" Mr. Merculief asked.

Will thought of the headache-inducing history test, all those trivia questions he didn't understand about people and wars he'd never heard of. And the reading test, where he'd mixed up the word 'frog' with 'fog' and couldn't figure out what was going on in any of the stories.

"Bad," he said decisively.

"Are you sure?"

He nodded and made his next move. Mr. Merculief studied the chessboard, rubbing his chin.

"Your teacher said you did very well, actually," he said. "Did she tell you your scores?"

"No," said Will.

"You had high school levels in science and math," Mr. Merculief said. "And your logic matrix was very high, Will. That's the quiz you took with the penguins and polar bears. It tests your problem-solving skills."

Oh. Well, if Will had scored well on *that*, then it had to be some sort of fluke. He'd been guessing hopelessly on every single question.

"What about reading?" he asked.

"You had high scores in that as well," Mr. Merculief said. "About a fifth-grade level."

"Ms. Johanssen said I could read all the words out loud but that doesn't mean I *understand* them," said Will.

Mr. Merculief didn't answer for a moment. "So she *did* tell you your scores?" he asked, his voice neutral.

"My father told me she said that."

Silence. Mr. Merculief watched as Will twisted one of his pawns at the base. There was a slow hissing sound as Mr. Merculief took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. The beanbag chair shifted under his weight.

"Actually, when your father comes in, I was planning to talk to him about a program you might like," Mr. Merculief said. "You'd be taking private lessons with the high school teachers for math and science. But you'd be staying with your first-grade class for English, history, and art. Not because you're bad at those subjects, Will. Because you'll have more fun at your own grade level, and because those are the sorts of classes where you just need to take your time and learn the facts at a slow pace. What do you think?"

Will stared at the chessboard, his stomach tight. "What for?" he said.

"We'll talk to your dad when gets in," Mr. Merculief promised.

"What's the program for?" asked Will, a little louder, but still polite. Mr. Merculief glanced up from the chessboard and studied Will as if seeing him for the first time.

"It's ... to keep you busy," he said gently.

Will swallowed. "Because I fidget," he said. "And I talk too much."

"Because you're a bright kid," said Mr. Merculief firmly. "...Even if you do get a lot of red cards." Will must have looked stricken, because Mr. Merculief rushed to add, "We won't tell your dad about that."

"Okay," said Will, suddenly on the verge of tears. He stared hard at the chessboard and willed the moisture in his eyes away.

"But you're a bright kid," Mr. Merculief went on, "and you've got a good shot at Starfleet if we get you into a program that suits your skills. Ms. Johanssen told me you like Starfleet. She said you won the end-of-quarter prize for best grades and you got to pick a prize out of the box. What did you pick?"

"A Stargazer," Will said.

"What's a Stargazer?" asked Mr. Merculief in a tone that suggested he already knew.

"It's a ship," Will said patiently. "A Starfleet ship. The best one."

"And you put that model together all on your own, right?"

What else was he supposed to do with it? "Yes, sir," Will said.

Mr. Merculief nodded to himself. "You like math and science, don't you?"

Will shrugged.

"Well, you like sports, right?"

"Yeah," said Will. "I'm on the baseball team. All Stars."

He said it tentatively, expecting — well, he didn't know what. But Mr. Merculief gave him an encouraging smile.

"This program wouldn't just be for school, Will," he said. "You'd get to take some martial arts if you want to. And you can start the early

courses at the flight academy as soon as you pass the entrance exam — we'll help you with that. You could have your pilot's license by age thirteen. And, if you like, you can start tagging along to cross country with the big kids in the spring. I'm the coach, and I would love to have you."

Will nodded and sniffed, eyes still on the chess pieces.

"Will?" said Mr. Merculief, his voice suddenly soft. "Are you okay?"

Will nodded and kept his face tight and blank. He moved one of his bishops forward, the first big move of the match. But Mr. Merculief didn't even notice.

"Are you crying?" Mr. Merculief asked.

"No," said Will, making sure his voice was full of disgust at the very idea. Why *would* he be crying? Nothing bad had happened. Dad liked Starfleet; he liked it when Will did well; he'd be pleased. So no, Will wasn't crying, but still, Mr. Merculief's eyebrows shot up and he opened his mouth to respond—

—but at that exact moment, his communicator went off.

"Excuse me," Mr. Merculief said. He turned away to answer, and Will knew before he even heard his father's voice that Kyle Riker must have arrived. Outside, the snow was falling fast, and it would be a long slow drive home, with lots to talk about. Or lots for Kyle to say, while Will listened. He cleaned the chessboard off and put all the pieces away silently, his gut churning. Equal parts excitement for the new program and anxiety that his dad, for whatever reason, would say no.

And while Mr. Merculief's back was turned, Will raised his t-shirt and used the hem to wipe his eyes.

Chapter 15

When Commander Riker left sickbay, he was in civvies. A few crewmen nodded at him on their way past, and several flashed him a smile, but no one stopped to chat. It was, after all, the start of Alpha Shift, and most people had work to do.

“You’ll report straight to Counselor Troi,” Beverly said. She said it more to Worf than to Riker. “Once she’s released you, Captain Picard wants to see you in his ready room. But Will—”

He was already turning to follow orders. Now he spun back on his heel and raised an eyebrow.

“Take some time for breakfast, please,” said Beverly, her face softening.

“You kidding me? I’m starving,” Riker said. “I could eat a ... Worf, what’s the largest Klingon animal you can think of?”

“I am familiar with the Terran phrase ‘to eat a horse,’” said Worf stiffly.

Riker shot Beverly a grin, and she returned it with a little dip of the eyelids that, for Beverly, more or less equated to an eyeroll. But the spark of humor was brief, buried quickly beneath concern — a lingering look, a sweep of her gaze down Riker’s face as she studied him. Like she still wasn’t sure, after three days of psych evals and physical healing, that he was ready for release. Riker turned away so he wouldn’t have to see that hesitation.

“Well, the quicker we get this done, the quicker I can eat,” he said brightly. “Shall I take your arm?”

Worf grumbled and took a careful step away from Riker. They made their way, one in uniform and one out, down to Deanna’s office.

Riker didn’t look back.

“How are you feeling?” Deanna asked.

Sometimes, Will suspected she’d ordered this sofa just for him. She couldn’t have. Obviously, she’d set up her office on the Enterprise long before Will was assigned as its first officer. But the sofa was uniquely suited to his tastes. The curve of the back slotted against his spine exactly where he needed it, to relieve the pain — and the couch was high enough that his long legs didn’t feel cramped when he sat in it too long.

Maybe she hadn’t chosen it specifically for him. But he was willing to bet that somewhere deep in her subconscious, she’d been thinking of him that day.

“Will,” Deanna prompted.

“Can’t you tell?” Will asked.

“Of course I can tell.” She said it so gently. “But I’d like to hear you say it.”

“Doesn’t that strike you as...” He trailed off, chewing his words. “A violation?”

“For you to say what you’re feeling?” Deanna asked levelly. “Or for me to see it in your head?”

For some reason, the latter hadn’t occurred to Will at all. No, having Deanna in his head ... that felt right. Natural. All of Betazed could read his mind and it would be a violation, but Deanna?

“I mean,” he said carefully, “that you already know what I’m feeling. So it seems cruel to make me say it aloud.”

“Cruel?” asked Deanna, her voice neutral. But she couldn’t really hide her emotions from him, either. She was a little amused.

“I know it’s over-dramatic,” said Will with a half-smile.

“Everyone’s feelings are over-dramatic,” said Deanna drily. “But we don’t judge people by what they feel, Will. Only by what they do.”

The humor washed away. She’d meant that to be comforting, he could tell. She’d meant to say, ‘You may feel embarrassed to discuss your feelings, but the embarrassment doesn’t show.’ Or ‘You keep your emotions under tight outward control, Will. No one would look at you and see drama.’ But when it came down to feelings vs. actions, Will had spent the last three days in a psych hold for a reason. He stared at his shoes, and out of the periphery of his vision he saw Deanna’s chest rise and fall, and heard her sigh.

“I’ll tell you what you’re feeling, then,” she said. “Since you don’t want to say it.”

“I can say it,” Will protested.

She raised an eyebrow. “But will you?”

Fair enough. Will gestured for her to take the floor.

“You’re nervous,” Deanna said. Her hands were clasped in her lap but her shoulders lost a little bit of their tension as she studied him, her eyes wide and dark and always soft. “And you’re angry with yourself. That’s natural. But three days ago, Will, I sensed a darkness in you, and that darkness isn’t there anymore.”

“Just like that?” Will asked.

“You’re still tired. You still wish, at least a little, that you could be numb. But—”

She held her hand out to him and without thinking, Will leaned forward to wrap his fingers around hers, squeezing tight. He gave her a questioning look, but he didn’t let go. And soon, Deanna’s features melted into a smile.

“But you’re waiting for someone to reach out,” Deanna said. “And when they do, you’re ready to take hold.”

Will sat back as if he’d been stung.

“Not what you wanted to hear?” Deanna asked.

“It’s not that.” The denial was automatic. He shook his head, broke eye contact, stared starboard, at a vaguely familiar painting on the far wall. Only after he’d stared at it for a few seconds did he realize he’d bought it for her years ago, during those six months when they were together but not together — Deanna, still on Betazed, finishing out her last year at university, and Will, alone and wound tight on a new starship, desperate to prove he was worthy of command.

That painting. He’d looked at it in a shop on shore leave and the paint had swirled and for just a second he’d heard her voice in his head.

Imzadi.

Will snapped his head around to stare at Deanna.

You want to be self-sufficient, she said, and beneath her words, there was an undercurrent of emotion that said she understood. *You want to leave sickbay today fully healed, all on your own. With no one to witness the struggle.*

Or no struggle at all, Will said.

Deanna nodded. *But no one is that self-sufficient,* she said. *You know that. You would make a poor first officer if you didn’t.*

I know. He let out a shuddering sigh and pictured his bridge crew. All of them trained in the same areas; all of them, nonetheless, with different areas of expertise and levels of skill. And then he remembered his first private meeting with Jean-Luc, the day the captain’s expectations were laid out for him. Picard, the authoritarian, the strategist. Riker, the sympathetic ear, the tactician. His job as first officer was to listen, to absorb information, to risk his life when necessary ... and to look after the well-being of his ship and crew. But he’d...

His fingers tightened in the material of his trousers. He’d failed. Like the supervisor who sees everyone’s flaws but his own. He’d kept his ship well-oiled and his crew balanced. And then he’d tipped over the edge.

There’s that darkness again, said Deanna softly.

“Yeah,” said Will aloud. She followed his lead at once, withdrawing from his head — like a warm, physical touch going cold. But Will was grateful that she pulled away.

“Are you suicidal, Will?” Deanna asked frankly.

To his mortification, a hot tear rolled down his cheek. He swept it away with the back of his hand. “Sorry,” he said, voice rough. “I thought I was ... I thought all this was over. The crying.”

“Are you suicidal?” she asked again.

He thought about it. Thought about it seriously. Pictured all the tempting ways he could do it, here on the Enterprise. Tried to muster up the energy to follow through.

“No,” he said honestly. “Too tired.”

“And if you get a good night’s sleep,” Deanna said, studying his face, “and you wake up well-rested, will you have the energy to kill yourself then?”

He gave her a reluctant, watery smile. “I think,” he said, “after a good night’s sleep, I won’t want to anymore.”

And despite her best counselor’s face and the neutral wall she was trying so hard to project, Will felt a wash of relief coming from Deanna.

“Go get some breakfast, Will,” she said, taking his hand again. “Solo. Take an hour to just sit in Ten-Forward — that’s my medical advice. And then go talk to Jean-Luc, alright?”

“Alright,” Will said. “I will.”

Chapter 16

Winter, 2341

"You'll be my little helper," Mrs. Shugak said. "Stand on your stool."

Will's so-called dishwashing stool was really just an overturned milk crate, and the plastic grid hurt his bare feet and left red dents in his skin. But he jumped up onto it without complaint and studied the ingredients Mrs. Shugak had laid out on the kitchen counter.

"What are we making?" he asked.

"What do you think?" Mrs. Shugak said.

She said it nicely, not how Dad would say it. Will took stock of the ingredients. Flour and eggs, with a big mixing bowl and a rolling pin set to the side...

"Pie," he decided.

"Very close. We're making piroche."

Piroche. Will mouthed the unfamiliar word to himself, his eyes sharp.

"It's a sort of pie," Mrs. Shugak explained, "but it has fish in it, rice, scallions... Did you wash your hands?"

He showed her his palms. Squeaky clean. And then his nails, where he'd been careful to dig out the layer of black grime he seemed to collect every day. Mrs. Shugak made a doubtful noise but didn't make him wash again.

"Is it *my* fish?" he asked, chest swelling with pride.

"Darling, I don't think your fish was big enough for piroche. This is a salmon Mr. Shugak got from the market."

"Oh." Will got on tiptoes to study the pink-ish fillet. The one he'd caught had been much smaller. Gray-scaled and flat-eyed with a thin stream of blood trickling from its mouth. This slab of oily meat really didn't look like a fish at all. It had no bones, no eyes, no face, no scar in its lip from where it had been hooked before. Will settled back onto the balls of his feet.

"Remember when we made noodles?" Mrs. Shugak asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You'll make this dough the same way," Mrs. Shugak said. "Only we won't be rolling it into little balls. When it's done, we'll flatten it out into great big sheets. Can you handle that while I make the filling?"

"I want to learn how to make the filling, too."

"You will, darling." She brushed a hand over his shoulders, broad and warm, and Will turned obediently to the wooden board. He dusted it with flour, watching out of the corner of his eye as Mrs. Shugak prepared the rice. It was easy to make the dough on autopilot. He just had to mix the butter and flour for what seemed like forever, and when it got too hard to mix, he added a little water. Easy. But Mrs. Shugak had the *fun* part. She worked the stove, sauteeing onions in a pan slicked with butter until they were golden brown and the sharp scent in the air made Will's throat tingle and his stomach whine. Next she plucked a bowl of hard-boiled eggs from the fridge and diced them up until they were just small white-and-yellow flecks of rubber. Scallions came next, all of it tossed in the rice together.

"How is it on your end?" Mrs. Shugak asked, checking on Will's dough.

"Boring," he said.

She chuckled a little and dipped her finger into the mixing bowl. "I think it's ready. Use half of it to make a nice, big sheet over that board. We're going to put the rice inside it, so we need—"

"Like a box," Will said, visualizing it. He grabbed two big handfuls of dough and plopped them down onto the floured board, where he mashed them together into one giant slab. "I get it."

"Very good." She watched, resting her considerable weight against the counter, while Will rolled out a bottom sheet. At her instruction, he used a little brush, like a paintbrush, to dust the dough with a gooey mix of egg yolks and water. When he was done, Mrs. Shugak helped him ease the sheet into a baking dish. He was afraid the fragile, soft white sheet would tear, but it held firm.

"Do you want to put the rice in?" Mrs. Shugak asked.

"Can I?"

She didn't answer. She just picked him up beneath the arms and settled him on her hip. Will wrapped his legs around her waist, a little startled by the sudden closeness. He leaned back by instinct, instead of into her, but Mrs. Shugak seemed to expect this — because she just settled her arm around the small of his back and held him in place, turning both of them to face the pot.

"Here you go," she said, slotting the serving spoon into Will's hand. "Fill it up, boss."

"And make it even?" Will asked.

"Do your best."

He lifted a heavy spoonful of rice and eggs and deposited it in the pan. It wasn't very graceful, but he used the back of his spoon to smooth the pile out, and then it looked okay. One spoonful at a time, the bottom layer of the piroche filled out. He was close to done when his hand started to tremble from the weight of the spoon and Mrs. Shugak slid him gently to the floor.

She handled the rest of it. Will watched from his perch atop the milk crate — a bottom layer of rice, then that salmon fillet on top, and more rice to finish. All of it sealed up with dough. She let him paint the top and crimp the edges — and then she fixed his less-than-artistic crimping as best she could. And when she was done, with the piroche in the oven and the warm scent of baked dough filling the air, Mrs. Shugak sat down at the kitchen table with a sigh. She tugged the rubber band out of her dark hair and wiped the sweat from her forehead, and suddenly she looked strange and young and almost pretty.

But tired. Always tired.

"You like cooking, Will?" she asked, tugging absently at the bags beneath her eyes.

"Yes," said Will. He climbed into the kitchen chair opposite her. Mrs. Shugak never scolded him too much for sitting in a chair wrong, so he risked it — and of course, today was the day that she made a face and gestured for him to sit right. Shame-faced, Will obeyed.

"What do you eat when I'm not here?" Mrs. Shugak asked with good-natured curiosity. "Do you still cook?"

"You mean when Dad's home?"

Mrs. Shugak nodded.

"He has a replicator," Will said.

"Really?" One eyebrow shot up. She looked around the kitchen at the pots and pans. No replicator was visible here, just the old-fashioned means of cooking that everyone in Valdez still had.

"He locks it up when he's gone," Will said. Mrs. Shugak met his gaze, her face so perfectly blank that Will knew she was mad. But he didn't know why, exactly. "You can ask him," Will said, suddenly unable to meet her eyes. "He'd probably let you use it."

"No," said Mrs. Shugak simply. She glanced away, her lips tight. Will watched from hooded eyes as she sucked her teeth. "You had a birthday recently," Mrs. Shugak said.

No. Not recently. It was back in August — months ago. Will studied her and stayed silent.

"What did you get?" Mrs. Shugak asked, facing him again.

Will exhaled slowly. "A starship model," he said.

"The Stargazer?"

"You know what it's called?" Will asked, brightening immediately. He sat up a little straighter. "I got the Stargazer for class. For my birthday I got the Enterprise."

"From your father, right?"

"Yes, ma'am." Will's stomach quivered at the memory. Unexpected. Treasured. Probably, it would be his favorite birthday gift ever, for the rest of his life.

"But Mr. Shugak and I, we didn't get you anything," Mrs. Shugak said. She was giving him a significant little smile.

Will furrowed his eyebrows at her. "You took me to the zoo."

"Mm. Not a gift."

"You got me that stuffed orca." The one he secretly slept with.

"That was a souvenir," said Mrs. Shugak thoughtfully. "Every child gets a souvenir when they're good."

Will stared at her almost suspiciously now, not sure what she wanted from him. What was he *supposed* to say? What was her goal? Sometimes he could tell, with adults. They thought they were clever, but they were really crystal clear. Especially when they were bribing you or asking you to keep secrets. But other times, like now, they were exhaustingly opaque.

"You took me out to dinner," he reminded her, his voice small. Suddenly he was too tired to guess, and Mrs. Shugak blinked as if seeing him for the first time.

"Will," she said, her voice dropping down an octave, "you're not in trouble."

"I know," he said, but he just wanted to sink into the floor now. He slouched down in his chair and studied the wood grain table, tracing patterns on the surface.

"I was thinking of getting you a late birthday gift," Mrs. Shugak explained. "That's all."

"It's okay. I don't need anything."

"*Will.*" She gave him a look that usually meant he was in trouble. But somehow, Will sensed that it was a joke this time. He gave her a tentative smile.

"*Mrs. Shugak,*" he said in the same exasperated tone, and Mrs. Shugak let out a bark of a laugh.

"You're too much, William. You had me truly worried, you know?"

"I know," he said cheekily. His gut was roiling with guilt. But he pretended he'd *meant* to mess with her, and Mrs. Shugak seemed to like it. She rested her chin on her hand and looked down at him, eyes soft. Affectionate, like Will's best friend Rosie when she looked at her sled dog puppies.

"What about a cookbook?" Mrs. Shugak asked. "Would you like that?"

Will raised one shoulder in a quizzical shrug and then kept it up. This was a gesture he always got in trouble for, because Dad and his teachers all thought it meant 'I don't know,' when really it meant 'I'm thinking.' His eyes drifted to the counter, where Mrs. Shugak's indecipherable wizard-like recipes were stored.

"A child's cookbook," Mrs. Shugak clarified. "That way you can read it all by yourself."

"They make those?"

"Mm-hmm. They come with pictures of all the ingredients and diagrams for every step. The nice ones even have video chips so you can watch a demonstration. What do you think?"

Will's chest was tight and loose at the same time, his heart pounding. "Really?" he asked, barely audible.

"Really," said Mrs. Shugak. "Of course, really."

Will forced himself to slow down and think it over. He pictured his dad coming home. Seeing the cookbook. Reaction — good or bad? Hard to imagine. He was so excited that he kept imagining Dad would be excited too, and the longer Will tried to change the image in his head, to make it more realistic, the more he squirmed in his seat, too eager to say yes. He imagined himself cooking breakfast — Dad taking a plate with a smile on his face — Dad's voice saying 'thank you' or 'this is delicious' or — did it matter? It wouldn't happen, really, but Will could feel a grin taking over his face and he was practically wiggling with excitement.

"Okay," he said.

"Okay?" said Mrs. Shugak, amused. "You will deign to allow this peasant to buy you a cookbook, Sir William?"

"If you insist, peasant woman," said Will brightly, and Mrs. Shugak laughed again. When she slid out of her chair, Will assumed she was checking on the oven, and he jumped down to follow her. But she caught him by surprise. Instead of turning to the stove, she pulled Will closer, into a tight hug. His face was buried against her apron, the smell of flour and sugar thick in his nose.

"You're a good cook, Will," she said, and to Will, her voice sounded too low, too fierce. He closed his eyes, heart pounding, and leaned into the hug. He wanted to say 'thank you.' Or ask her what she meant, why she said it like that. Why she was hugging him so tightly.

But he couldn't say a word. He just stood there, barefoot and warm and surrounded by the homey scent of a baking piroche, and let Mrs. Shugak hold him tight.

Chapter 17

"Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes."

Riker was seated on the other side of the bar, twisting at the waist to watch the view. But at the sound of Guinan's voice, he turned to face her, and for just a minute his mask was gone. His hair was soft and unstyled, his civilian clothes hanging off an underfed frame. The look he gave her was helpless — but not without humor.

"I'm supposed to eat something," he said as she planted her palms on the countertop. "Preferably something that doesn't have 'digestive' or 'anti-nausea' in its name."

"Are you nauseous, Commander?" she asked playfully.

"Depends on what you give me." He relaxed a little at her tone. His eyes started to sparkle again. Guinan pretended to think of something on the spot and snapped her fingers.

"Ahh, I have just the thing." She'd heard all about his troubles with food, of course, but she didn't show it. Guinan slid the bar door up and swept an arm out to invite Riker in. "Step into the kitchen, Chef."

She'd never invited him past the bar before, but he jumped to the task with admirable aplomb. Behind the wall of mixers and liquor, there was a fully stocked kitchen waiting for them to use. Every surface gleamed and alien instruments reflected the overhead lights from their racks. Riker paused, acclimated, and then circled Guinan's space like a hawk, inspecting the refrigeration unit and fresh fruits and vegetables.

"No one wants to eat replicator food in Ten-Forward," Guinan explained. "They're already sipping on synthetic alcohol. They don't want a steaming plate of replicated ratatouille to chase it down. And you're just in time to help me out with lunch."

"Does anyone eat real ratatouille with synthehol? Maybe a Kir Royale..." Riker was already reaching for the sanitizer, but now he hesitated. "I'm supposed to rendezvous with the captain in an hour."

"Then you're mine for sixty minutes," said Guinan lightly. "Let's see what we can do."

His face lit up; his features softened. As Guinan showed him where everything was stored and ran him through today's menu, the tension in his shoulders relaxed a little. She knew of course that he liked to cook, and she'd heard about his sometimes-infamous (and sometimes lovely) experiments in the kitchen. Risk-taker, on the field and behind the stove. But he melted into the kitchen like he belonged here, like he'd been working here all his life. As they danced around each other, he got used to all the alien cooking devices he'd need and took to them like a Borg to ... well, anything. He was good at taking orders too, and he only changed Guinan's recipe in the tiniest ways, with permission.

She decided to let him.

"It might be better with a bit of Andorian hinta-sauce," he said after tasting the fry-fish salad.

"I'll trust your judgment," Guinan said, and Riker tipped the elegant Andorian bottle with all its glass ridges and ornamental loops until a drizzle of sauce hit the pan. He mixed it well, with a sizzle and a hint of blue smoke, and then tasted it again ... and didn't seem to realize that, one bit at a time, he was eating. "Good?" Guinan asked.

"Perfect," Riker said.

"And how are you feeling?" Guinan asked.

Riker glanced up from the post-lunch pastry puffs he'd just started on. He blinked at her. For a moment, she realized, he'd forgotten where he was, where he'd been. All the stress had melted away, leaving just the kitchen and the gentle music from Ten-Forward in its place.

"Good," said Riker slowly.

"You seem good," Guinan said in her gentle, rolling voice. "Leveled out."

Riker considered this and gave a slight nod. He turned back to the unbaked pastry puffs but didn't touch the dough, his rhythm interrupted.

"Meditation looks different for everyone," Guinan said. "I find that nothing clears my mind quite like working on a challenging meal."

"Eating it, or preparing it?" Riker asked, a little off-center.

"Both, I suppose," Guinan said. "But more the latter. Will?"

He glanced sideways at her, guarded, unsure.

"It's *good* to feel leveled out," Guinan said with half a smile. "Usually you get that from Counselor Troi. But you can't be around Counselor Troi one hundred percent of the time, can you?"

"No," Riker said. His voice was carefully neutral, but his shoulders were still relaxed.

"Well, maybe you can join me in Ten-Forward, then," said Guinan lightly. "If your schedule allows for it."

That got a begrudging smile out of him.

“My schedule allows for just about anything right now,” he said. He returned to the pastry puffs, finding his momentum again. “I can help you out. *If* you really need it. I suspect you could run this whole ship on your own, if we let you.”

“I suspect *not*.” Guinan stirred the dish she was working on, a type of Bajoran gumbo, and gestured for Riker to join her. “Try this.”

She held the spoon to his lips. Obediently, he took a sip, cupping his palm beneath the spoon to catch any spillage.

“The krostea meat too,” Guinan said. “I need to make sure it’s tender.”

He tried some, cracking open the shell to suck out the lurid green meat inside. His fingers came away stained with red spices.

“Good?” Guinan asked.

Riker closed his eyes and swallowed. He nodded, still relishing the taste. Then he took another, more generous helping and peeked at her from just one eye, the other closed in a wink. “Are you gonna force-feed me every time I visit?” he said.

“Who’s being forced?” asked Guinan with a grin. “Get your hands out of the pot, you imp.”

“Touché.”

The commander who walked into Picard’s office at midday looked strangely young. Maybe it was his posture; maybe it was an after-effect of helping Guinan in the kitchen (goodness knows she made *Picard* feel like a child sometimes). Or maybe it was just a natural result of what Picard now knew about Riker. The vulnerability he couldn’t unsee.

“Take a seat, Number One,” he said, gesturing to the empty chair across from him.

The use of ‘Number One’ rather than ‘Will’ was deliberate, and it seemed to chip away a little at that guarded expression on Riker’s face. He slid into the empty chair and leaned hard to the side. Before he read Riker’s medical files, Picard had seen this posture merely as an idiosyncrasy — something to mildly disapprove of at first, and gradually grow to like. But now when he saw that lean, he knew that deep in his bones, so deep he scarcely felt it anymore, Riker was in pain.

“I imagine you’re anxious to hear your schedule,” Picard said, folding his hands on the desk.

“Yes, sir.”

“Four days of shipboard leave,” Picard said, jumping right into it, “punctuated with regular therapy sessions, to be coordinated between yourself and Dr. Macnair. Then, Number One, I expect you to return to duty. With ongoing sessions, of course, in your free time.”

Riker’s eyes flitted over Picard’s face, studying every minute twitch of muscle. He didn’t look convinced.

“Number One?” Picard prompted.

“Sir?”

“Did you have something to say?”

Riker’s expression didn’t change, and he didn’t stop studying Picard, but his chest rose and fell in a sigh. “Is that all?” he asked. “Just back to normal? What about discipline?”

“Discipline?” asked Picard, pretending not to understand.

Riker gave him an exasperated look. “We talked about this, sir.”

“Yes. We did. And I believe I gave you my answer. Was I somehow unclear?”

Riker looked away, his eyes stormy.

“Do you want to be punished that badly, Number One?” asked Picard, striving to keep his voice light. “If so, you are free to consider your four days of leave a punishment. Certainly you avoid leave like the plague, so it must be unpleasant for you.”

“Just ... leave,” Riker said, his voice unreadable. “And then back to work. Like nothing happened.”

Picard raised an eyebrow. “Now, I know, Number One, that you don’t mean to ask for a group therapy session. So what is it you’re really asking me?”

Riker’s brows furrowed, just slightly. He gave a clipped shake of the head. “Nothing, sir. Belay my last.”

That wouldn’t do. Picard sat back in his chair and searched Riker’s face for a moment. A face he knew almost as well as his own by now. His first officer; his right hand. In most ways, Riker was his next of kin; such was the nature of a long-term mission like theirs. But while Picard had an easy time commanding authority, he still struggled with the warmth and friendliness that people like Guinan and Riker found so easy. No wonder Riker was tense. He’d gone from an hour in the kitchen with a loving mother to a dressing-down from a stern father in his study ... and he didn’t know enough about family life to realize it. Picard let his breath out in a long, slow exhalation and turned to stare at his fish, beautiful creatures, not a thought in their heads.

“Data has struggled somewhat as first officer,” said Picard to the fish. “He will be immensely relieved to have you back. Or as relieved as an android can be.”

Riker was silent.

“Mr. La Forge and Ensign Crusher were in not-insignificant distress at your disappearance as well,” Picard said. “You might say they were in low spirits. And Dr. Crusher, I know, suffered several sleepless nights with you in sickbay. Mr. Worf has nearly bitten the head off anyone who dared ask him where you were. And Counselor Troi...”

Subtly, Riker’s body stiffened, from his shoulders down to his white-knuckled hands. He steadfastly refused to meet Picard’s eyes.

“Counselor Troi was traumatized,” said Picard softly, “by finding her closest friend near death in the holodeck.”

He could see the strain in Riker’s eyes, the nearly unnoticeable working of his face as he struggled to stay blank.

“I expect my first officer back,” said Picard, still in a near-whisper. “But I need you to work with me, Will. To let me know if anything goes wrong. Just as I...” He hesitated, squared his shoulders, forced himself to say it. “Just as you looked after me, after the Borg.”

Finally, Riker met his eyes. *Ease down, Jean-Luc*, Picard thought to himself. He had to bend. To be more gentle. Fatherly, the very thing he’d always struggled with the most as an officer. The thing everyone always needed so much more than whatever he could actually provide. He forced himself to hold Riker’s gaze, without his guards up, without any walls.

“Will you work with me, Will?” he asked.

He could see the exact moment Riker’s distress folded into pity, and he knew he’d done it all wrong. He must have let his awkwardness show somewhere — a hint of fluster — because now Riker’s expression smoothed over into the mask he’d worn a thousand times before, soft-eyed and affectionate and in-control.

“You never needed as much work as you thought you did,” Riker said.

“Will.”

“But I did wish, sometimes, that you’d reach out more,” Riker acknowledged, and even this — exactly what Picard thought he wanted to hear — rang a little false. Especially when Riker stood and brushed the wrinkles out of his civvies, a pleasant smile touching his lips. “If I need help, I’ll ask for it, sir. And you don’t have to guilt me by bringing my crew into it.”

“Of course not,” Picard said, mollified a little by that touch of steel in Riker’s eyes. “But no more masks, Number One.”

“Sir...” And Riker’s smile was subtly different. More real. “It’s not a mask. This is me.”

“And you’re perfectly fine, I see,” Picard said.

“Perfectly, sir.”

And there it was again. That flash of titanium in his gaze. Picard maintained eye contact, measured the depth of Riker’s determination, and gave a single nod.

“Back on the bridge in four days, Number One,” he said. “Dismissed.”

By the time Picard made it to his evening appointment with Dr. Macnair, he’d gone over the conversation with Riker a thousand times. One moment he thought it had been a complete and abject failure. The next, he was hopeful that a little tough love was precisely what Will needed. But he couldn’t be sure. And he couldn’t state with 100% confidence that *tough love* was what he provided. It had felt rather more like a subtle diplomatic failure: the wrong word combined with the wrong expression or gesture and suddenly the Federation had an interplanetary dispute on his hands. Puzzles upon puzzles, all of them personal, none of them in Jean-Luc’s wheelhouse.

His holoscreen lit up, and there was the one person who might — *might* — help him figure it out.

“Captain Picard,” Dr. Macnair said, looking exhausted. “I don’t have much time, but we can talk for a little bit. You want to hear about Will?”

“Your assessment, Doctor, if you please.”

Macnair nodded. His eyes shifted to the side, brow wrinkling as he considered his notes. “Well, I can see why you value him so highly as an officer. And as a friend.”

Mind your business, Picard thought, a tad uncharitably. Will was his friend, but...

“In our sessions so far, Will has made a very good impression. He’s charming, intelligent, upbeat, good-humored...”

Picard nodded, relaxing a little. Until he saw Macnair’s eyes harden.

“...and completely uncooperative in therapy,” Macnair said.

Bollocks.

“Captain, as far as your first officer is concerned, his suicidal tendencies are completely behind him,” said Macnair frankly. “His past is over. He needs to be as stable and happy as possible to keep what he values — and that’s his job.”

“Not just his rank, surely,” Picard said.

“No, not just his rank. The Enterprise. The crew. That’s his family, Captain. He’ll put on a thousand different personas if he thinks it’s necessary, just to stay where he is. With you.”

Picard’s heart sank. He thought it over, tallied it against what he’d seen and heard so far, on the first day of Riker’s release. After his earlier meeting with Picard, Riker had roamed the halls out of uniform, catching up on the problems and everyday heartaches of his crew. Reports indicated Riker was friendly, smiling, gentle, quick to laugh or offer advice — nothing out of the ordinary.

“And this won’t last,” said Picard softly.

“Undoubtedly,” Macnair agreed. His eyes, like Troi’s, were a dark reflecting pool, full of sympathy. Picard could barely stand to look at them. He scrubbed his face with his knuckles and let out a sigh.

“So what do we do?” he asked, his voice rough.

“We wait,” the therapist said. “And when William decides that he needs help ... then he’ll be ready for it.”

Chapter 18

First grade with Ms. Johannsen wasn't so bad. His best friend Rosie was here, even though she was a year older than Will. She sat on the far side of the room, though, because Will had gotten too many red cards for whispering to her when they sat side by side. And ever since the new program started, Will saw Rosie less and less. She was there at judo, and he could always go see her sled dogs after school or hang out with her in the woods like he was now, but during class ... half the time Will was being pulled out to sit with the high school students, and half the time Rosie was being pulled for speech therapy or remedial reading lessons with Miss Dorie.

"I hate Miss Dorie," Rosie told him, her voice laced with venom. She was a big girl, the same height as Will — but more broad, more strong — and as she spoke, she grabbed a fallen branch from the forest floor and snapped it over her knee. With some difficulty, sure, but Will was still impressed.

"Why do you hate her?" he asked.

"She thinks I'm stupid. *Everyone* thinks I'm stupid."

Will waffled on that. It was true, everyone did. And it wasn't fair, because he knew Rosie was smart. But he didn't know how to fix it. He scuffed at the broken branch with his shoe. It was green on the inside, and still pliant.

"Let me show you something cool," he said. He crouched down and pulled out his pocketknife. "If you strip the bark back, you can make a flower."

Rosie still had a storm cloud in her eyes, but she squatted next to him and watched, even holding the branch in place when Will needed her to. With the sharp side of his blade, he cut the bark away one piece at a time and then dug a little deeper, into the tender green flesh. Strips of it peeled away in clumsy curves, still attached to the branch at the base. Will went around the branch in a circle, peeling strips off all along the stem.

"They look like petals," Rosie said after a while.

"See? You try."

She looked around for another piece of wood. Instead of going for a branch, she found a little twig with buds still attached to it and dug her thumbnail into it. It wasn't green, but it was wet from the melting snow and still flexible.

"This one," Rosie said. She had her own pocketknife, so Will pocketed his and watched as she stripped the bark away. "Where'd you learn to do this?"

"Mr. Shugak," Will said proudly. Mr. Shugak was quiet, and lots of people in the village thought he was slow. But he could make any piece of wood become ... whatever he wanted it to be. The Shugaks' home was filled with homemade furniture, hand-carved spoons, statuettes and wooden puzzles. And the scent of wood shavings and sawdust filled the air, probably Will's favorite smell in the whole world, outside of the ocean. Rosie chipped at her twig a little longer, first forming a flower with some difficulty, then blithely chopping the petals away when she was done.

"Yours was better," she said.

"Just cuz I've done it before. Mr. Shugak is better than me."

"Why do you call him that?" Rosie asked, shooting him a strange glance.

"Mr. Shugak?"

"Yeah."

Will hitched one shoulder up and shifted his feet. He gave her a narrow-eyed squint.

"He's your uncle, isn't he?" said Rosie. She tossed her butchered twig away. "You should call him Uncle."

"He's not my uncle," Will muttered.

"Mrs. Shugak is your mom's aunt. So that makes Mrs. Shugak your double-aunt. Or something."

"My mom's dead."

"You still have aunts and uncles," said Rosie simply. She didn't push it, and the tension building in Will, the hot flush of embarrassment, faded away. Left him cold and drained. If Mr. and Mrs. Shugak were his aunt and uncle, then Dad would have mentioned it to him. *They* would have mentioned it to him. And besides, Mr. and Mrs. Shugak were Unangax, and Will's mom...

He couldn't picture her. He turned to the river and chucked his flower-branch inside.

"Do I make you feel stupid?" he asked, facing the water. "Like Miss Dorie?"

He could sense Rosie turning to study him, but he pretended not to notice. He just watched the branch bob beneath the surface and come back up again, the wood a little darker than before.

“You never make me feel stupid,” said Rosie softly. “That’s why we’re friends.”

Tentatively, Will sneaked a glance at her. She looked half-earnest and half-mortified, ready to punch him if he made fun of her. Will wagged his eyebrows and remembered something his dad had said once when they had guests over.

“You just like me for my body.”

“Ew! Don’t joke like that.” Rosie made a face, which just made Will laugh harder.

“Admit it. You think I’m cute.”

“No,” Rosie insisted. She brushed past him, pretending to gag, but Will bumped into her and they both stumbled. In the slippery mess of wet grass and melting snow, they tumbled to the ground, half-wrestling and half-laughing. He knew Rosie would beat him — she usually did. But he still liked to fight her. The bruises afterward — he liked to study them, to touch them. Different than other bruises. And sometimes, he couldn’t say why — he wasn’t *mad* at anyone, he just wanted to *fight*, liked the grip of someone else’s fingers on his hip or shoulder, driving him to the ground — legs twisting, hands pinching, bellies pressed together.

It was fun. Why the other kids didn’t like it so much, Will didn’t know. He *craved* it. Couldn’t sit still in class, thinking about recess, about judo. Rehearsed in his mind what he would say to so-and-so on the playground to goad them into a good-natured fight. Sometimes the other kids didn’t understand that it was just pretend, but Rosie always knew. Rosie—

“What the hell are you doing?” said a voice that made Will’s blood run cold.

The wrestling stopped. The laughter died. Rosie shifted sideways, no longer straddling Will, and both of them turned to stare silently at Kyle Riker. He was still wearing his Federation sweater with the little insignia on the shoulder pad. Must’ve just gotten off the transport. Will was suddenly vividly aware of the wet ground soaking through his clothes, the flush on his cheeks, the dryness in his throat.

“I asked you a question,” Kyle said, his eyes lasering into Will. What was he doing here? How had he found them? “Rosa, go.”

Rosie pushed slowly to her feet. She glanced at Will, a question in her eyes, but she was smart enough to keep her face mostly blank. He swallowed hard and avoided her gaze.

He heard her walk away.

“Aren’t you a bit young for that?” Kyle demanded when she was gone, his voice ringing out in the forest, sharp like a slap across the face. “Get up. *Up*. Look at your *clothes*...”

Will put his palms flat in the stinging snow and stood. “We were just playing,” he said, his voice shaky. “She...”

“How old are you, Billy?” Kyle cut him off. He clicked his fingers together and pointed to his own feet, the way he always called Will to stand before him. Will shuffled forward and fought the urge to put his head down.

“Six,” he said.

“Six,” Kyle repeated. His eyes were flinty and dark. A hint of revulsion circled his lips in a sneer. “Old enough to know better. And *don’t* tell me you were just playing again.”

Will clamped his mouth shut, cheeks burning. With a sigh, Kyle dropped down to one knee, careful not to actually sink his trousers into the snow. Level with Will, he searched his son’s face. Then his gaze tracked lower, down Will’s wrinkled shirt and rumpled jacket to the front of his jeans. Slowly, telegraphing every movement, Kyle rested his broad palm on Will’s hip and smoothed his hand over — down — until Will’s eyes squeezed shut and his jaw tightened, and his father cupped him through his jeans.

“This is exactly what I’m talking about,” said Kyle softly, his breath warm against Will’s hair. “This. Billy, your friend Rosa ... she isn’t *like* you. *Other kids* are not like you.” He released Will and wiped his hands clean in the snow, even though there’d been a layer of denim between his skin and Will’s. Kyle shook his head in thinly-veiled disgust. “Do you ever fight with other boys?”

“Yes, sir,” said Will, close to tears now.

“I know you do,” Kyle snapped, as if Will had denied it. “Do they ever react like that? Like *you* do?”

Will blinked, his vision blurry. He swallowed against a tight throat and shook his head. With trembling hands, he covered himself, hiding the small tent between his legs.

“No,” Kyle agreed. He sighed. Hands clean now, he touched Will on each shoulder, boxing him in. And despite himself, Will swayed a little, anticipating a hug, longing to lean into his father’s chest. Kyle held him upright and in place. “Rosa is too young for wrestling,” Kyle told him firmly. “You need to leave her alone. No more play-fighting. You understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said Will, voice broken. A flash of sympathy crossed Kyle’s face. He shook Will a little — gently — and then finally, mercifully, pulled him into a tight, warm hug.

“You’re not *bad*, Billy,” he said, sounding exhausted. He ran his fingers through Will’s hair and Will closed his eyes, burying his face in his father’s chest. The unfamiliar scent of starships, all titanium and canned air, pervaded Kyle’s clothes. “You’re just different,” he said.

“I know.” He wasn’t supposed to say ‘I know.’ Will twisted his fingers in Kyle’s sweater and leaned closer. “Yes, sir.”

“You have different needs,” Kyle said, as if Will hadn’t spoken. He stood, looping an arm under Will’s backside to pick him up. Will melted

into the hug, arms around Kyle's neck, face hidden. His father's palm drifted to Will's thigh and boosted him up a little, then stayed. "We know how to take care of those needs *appropriately*," Kyle said, rubbing Will's back. "In the privacy of our own house, without forcing other little kids into it where they don't belong. Like you tried to do with Rosa. Yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"So what are we going to do?"

Kyle's hand was like a branding iron. Will kept his eyes closed. He wasn't hard anymore; where his briefs had been too tight before, when Kyle touched him, there was now a comfortable heat.

"Take care of it," Will whispered, hiding his face against Kyle's sweater. His father held him a little closer, turned his head, pressed his lips gently against Will's scalp. His thumb rubbed a circle on Will's thigh.

"Exactly," he said.

Chapter 19

Those four days of leave didn't last long. At the same time, they lasted an eternity.

On the third day, a visiting troop of officers beamed aboard the Enterprise. They were the best and brightest of the U.S.S. Damocles, including a tall blond man named Lieutenant Commander Ibsen who had served under Riker on the Hood.

"Is Will around?" he asked brightly, looking around the bridge as if he expected Riker to pop out from behind the helm.

"He is on leave at the moment," Picard said. "But he sends his best wishes."

"On *leave*," said Ibsen significantly. He glanced at Troi, not realizing who she was to Riker, and popped her a wink that left everyone on the bridge bristling. "Well, we know what that means," he said. "Old Riker hasn't changed a bit."

And Picard almost felt bad for him, because it was clear Ibsen noticed a sudden chill on the bridge and a frost in the tone of every Enterprise officer who spoke to him after that. It was several hours before anyone melted ... around the time Picard would have called his men into the ready room and read them the riot act, if they hadn't shaped up on their own. He was proud to report a more convivial air when his officers led the Damocles men off-bridge.

And down to Ten-Forward.

Where Commander Riker was just exiting the kitchen with his sleeves rolled up and a dish towel over his arm.

Ibsen froze, and Riker did too, their eyes meeting and their faces blank. Around Ibsen, the crew of the Enterprise went through seven stages of shock and self-recrimination. Then Riker's lips split into his usual devilish grin.

"Look what the cat dragged in!" he crowed, pointing at Ibsen from across the bar. "Let me get you a cocktail. I call this one 'Midnight Sun.'"

The officers of the Enterprise eyed Ibsen closely to gauge his reaction. When Riker turned away, the surprise and delight on Ibsen's face gave way to confusion. Then concern. Then comprehension. All of it was locked up behind a tight smile by the time Riker finished pouring Ibsen a drink.

"Should've known you'd be down here," said Ibsen ruefully. "You always did like the kitchen better than the bridge. So is it 'Commander' or 'Head Chef' now?"

"Don't call me 'Head Chef' where Guinan can hear," Riker said, his eyes crinkling. He tossed a cherry into Ibsen's cocktail glass with a splash of liqueur and grenadine. "I'm on leave, and you know damn well there's nothing I like better than the bridge."

"Except away missions," Ibsen said with half a grin.

"Goes without saying."

"So why *are* you here?" asked Ibsen. If Riker noticed a certain tone to Ibsen's voice, he didn't show it. He just shrugged one shoulder.

"Gotta find something to do with my time."

"Don't you normally go planetside?" Ibsen asked, not quite as casually as he clearly hoped to be.

"Do you see a planet out there?" asked Riker, nodding to the viewscreen. He shot Ibsen a warm disarming smile and reached over, one broad hand closing around Ibsen's forearm. "I got band practice, Mike. I'll talk to you later."

"Band practice! I see how I rate."

Riker just tossed his dish towel aside and abandoned the bar with a laugh. Out of the corner of his eye, Worf followed Riker's moves, keeping an eye on him. The first officer approached his bandmates cheerfully enough. Perhaps *too* cheerfully, his gestures too lively and his voice booming out over the crowd. Their conversation started out loud enough for everyone to hear — just greetings — and then became lost in the din of Ten-Forward. Riker removed his trombone from his case, turned to cast a casual glance around the bar, and then sat heavily in one of the creaky little stools the band used for practice. By the time he settled down, his eyes were glassy and his face was pale. He kept his gaze averted, like that would stop everyone from seeing him.

"Poor guy," said a voice behind Worf.

Worf snapped his head around to glare at Ibsen. "I beg your pardon?"

Ibsen raised his eyebrows and took a sip of the cocktail. Red liqueur stained his lips. "Riker. I heard about his dad. Is that why he's on leave?"

Worf studied Ibsen's face. With his stoic face and pale hair, under the glittering lights, he was washed out and almost unreadable. A good face for Intelligence, Worf decided. Nondescript and plain, easy to blend in, hard to glean much from it. And Ibsen studied him right back.

"You look mad," said Ibsen mildly. "Am I not supposed to know?"

"What, precisely, do you think you know?" asked Worf, his voice stiff. Across the room, Riker's band had started up, but Riker himself wasn't playing. He sat with his trombone in his hands and his eyes on the floor, listening closely ... to the music, Worf supposed, or to a rhythm in his head that only he could hear.

“About the kid on Risa,” Ibsen said. Then his eyes shuttered and he drew back a little, and the casual air was gone. He was a Starfleet officer again, closed up. “Have you ever tried one of these, Mr. Worf?” he asked, tilting the cocktail glass.

“No.”

“It’s Riker’s signature drink,” said Ibsen. “Too bittersweet for me. It tastes like cough syrup.” He held the glass out by the stem. “Try it.”

“No, sir,” said Worf simply.

“You’re familiar with the term ‘midnight sun’?”

Worf bit his tongue and turned away, seeking out Riker’s eyes.

“Civil twilight,” Ibsen mused, watching that cherry float in the liqueur. “Seventy days, more or less, of endless sun. Can you imagine?” Then he glanced up at Worf, half-smiling. “Have you ever been? To Alaska, I mean?”

“I grew up on the farming world of Gault,” said Worf.

Ibsen’s eyebrows went up a notch. He let his gaze slide sideways to Riker and his band. Apparently he’d deemed Worf a lost cause, for he didn’t try any further small talk. He studied Riker openly, his expression smooth and blank. There was just a hint of hardness in his eyes. The resentment of two old friends of the same rank, one with a prestigious ship to his name, one without. Or the look, Worf thought, of a targ with blood on its tusks, swinging around for one last goring strike at its prey.

“Well, at least you keep him out of trouble here,” Ibsen said finally, voice soft.

“Trouble?” Worf repeated, his voice a low rumble in his chest.

“Yes.” Ibsen pinched back a smile, tight-lipped. “Reined in. Bad enough to lose a consultant like Kyle. Worse if these false allegations start to spread—”

“Kyle Riker’s expulsion from the Federation is his own doing,” Worf thundered, drawing himself up to full height. “*He* is the criminal. *Not* Commander Riker.”

Ibsen said nothing. He only stared up at Worf with a placid expression on his face, still fiddling with the stem of his cocktail glass. And when Ibsen failed to respond, Worf finally noticed the silence in Ten-Forward, the lack of music, the hushed conversations, and realized how his voice had cut across the crowd. He whipped his head around to look at Riker and found him staring back.

“So you don’t think he’s innocent?” Ibsen asked.

This whole conversation was a trap. Worf scowled at Ibsen and searched Ten-Forward for a solution. Some way to force Ibsen onto the back foot. Anything other than pulling Commander Riker into this ... but across the room, Riker set his trombone aside and slowly got to his feet. Conversation started up again with false cheer as Riker wove through the crowd, back to the bar. His civilian clothes — the lack of uniform — seemed more blatant than usual as he stood between Worf and Ibsen, looking first at one and then the other.

“What’s going on here?” asked Riker, with the voice of a commander.

“Worf here thinks your dad got what he deserved,” said Ibsen.

“Mike, are you here to drink, or are you here to cause trouble?” asked Riker flatly, and Worf let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. Ibsen’s placid expression fractured. “What, are you afraid I’m gonna rat you out for Orion?”

Ibsen got his face under control and slid the cocktail away from him. “There’s nothing to rat me out for,” he said evenly, but it took a great deal of effort for him to meet Riker’s eyes.

“I agree,” said Riker with glacial calm. “Now play nice and stop bothering my men. Worf—”

He closed his fingers around Worf’s forearm and dragged him away from the bar, out into the crowded corridor — where it seemed like everyone on the ship was either coming or going. No one stayed still long enough to eavesdrop on a conversation, so it was here that Worf and Riker stopped, sizing each other up.

“What happened on Orion?” Worf asked, his voice low.

“*Nothing* happened, Mr. Worf,” said Riker hotly. “What the hell are you doing discussing my father in Ten-Forward?”

“Sir. He—”

“I *know* he dragged you into it,” Riker said, cutting Worf off and slashing his hand dismissively through the air. “Ibsen’s ... that’s just how Ibsen is. But you know better than that, Worf. You’re a lieutenant commander, for God’s sake. You don’t rise to the bait.”

“I understand, sir.” Worf kept the ridiculous sense that he’d been wounded out of his eyes and voice. He took a deep, steadying breath and watched Riker’s face closely. “But I stand by what I said.”

“What?” Riker snapped.

“I stand by my statement, sir.” Worf saw no real comprehension on Riker’s face, just reflexive anger. He pushed harder. “I believe your father is a criminal. And I believe the Federation was justified in terminating his contract. He is not fit to serve Starfleet, sir, in any capacity other

than cannon fodder. I am glad he has been ... neutralized, and I am pleased he can no longer harm innocents. Even those who wish to testify on his behalf."

Silence again. Behind Riker, seen only by Worf, a handful of crewmen had slowed to a halt, staring openly at the confrontation in the hall. Behind this congestion of rubberneckers was Deanna Troi, her eyes wide and dark.

"You're calling your first officer a liar?" said Riker finally, his voice strange.

"No, sir," said Worf firmly.

"I testified for him. On his behalf. Are you saying I lied?"

"I am saying, sir, that your testimony does not change my opinion of Kyle Riker," said Worf. "I have seen the facts of the case, sir. I cannot say *why* you testified for him, but—"

"I *testified* for him because I know he did nothing *wrong*," Riker said, raising his voice. He and Worf were close enough to the same height that, if one of them really drew himself up, he could try to dwarf the other. Riker was doing this now, making himself as large and imposing as possible. So Worf did the same, refusing to back down. He drew himself up to full height and met Riker's eyes with a Klingon warrior's scowl. By instinct, he clamped one hand down on Riker's wrist just as Riker's arm whipped out — for what might have been, but couldn't *possibly* be, a punch.

Because Starfleet officers didn't brawl in Ten-Forward.

"Will you strike me, sir?" asked Worf, this time keeping his voice to a whisper.

Riker's face worked. He twisted his wrist out of Worf's grasp and stepped away, still bristling. "Keep your mouth shut about my family, Commander," he said, his voice sharp as steel. "That's an order."

"Aye, sir."

Riker spun on his heel.

And met Deanna's eyes.

And stopped.

"My office," said Deanna flatly. "Now."

How long had she been standing there? Normally he could sense her coming from a mile away, but now — between the pounding of his heart and the biting sound of his own voice snapping Worf's head off, he hadn't felt a thing. Riker turned to face her, hands akimbo and eyes wide. Tried to read her emotions. Her face.

No, she said, firm and clear. Her flat eyes stayed locked onto his. *Come to my office, imzadi.*

So what could he do? He followed, feeling like a kid called out to the principal's office. The surge of adrenaline that almost made him fight Worf — Worf! His friend — wasn't going away. By the time he and Deanna made it to the turbolift, he was mopping sweat from his face with the collar of his shirt.

The doors hissed shut.

"Deck Nine," Deanna announced, voice cool. Angry with him. Of course, angry with him. Because he'd picked a fight with one of his own men. Riker swallowed against a tight throat and kept his eyes forward.

He didn't realize she was reaching for him until she squeezed his hand.

Are you trying to make me feel bad, imzadi? she asked. *Or are you just a natural?*

Natural at what? Riker asked, his chest loosening a little.

The kicked puppy look.

He sneaked a hopeful glance at her and, beneath the flatness, saw a spark of humor. Faint, but there. He let his face relax into a smile.

No more, Deanna warned him, looking away.

No more fighting or no more smiling? Riker asked.

Deanna visibly struggled with the question. *Fighting*, she decided reluctantly. *But I admit I meant smiling, at first.*

He squeezed her hand lightly, just a pulse, his palm flexing against hers. Gratitude and affection. She would know what he meant. And now that adrenaline was creasing, folding, into something new.

"Do you want to know what we were fighting about?" Riker asked aloud when they reached Deck 9.

"I could hear most of it," said Deanna drily. She stepped out into the corridor ahead of him, leading the way — and she shifted her grip so they were no longer holding hands, but she hooked her arm in his instead. Anyone glancing at them might think they were just old, close friends out

for a stroll ... if not for the sweat soaking Riker's civvies or the arch, aristocratic look of disapproval in Deanna's eyes.

She marched them straight into her office. She sat primly on the low sofa meant for the counselor and held her palm out to the one meant for patients. Riker considered his options and sat at Deanna's side instead.

"Will," she said, a warning in her voice.

"You can't treat me," Riker reminded her, his voice soft. He took her hand again, gently cradling her delicate fingers in his. "With our past—"

Deanna jerked her hand out of his with a sharp sigh. "Let's discuss that, Will," she said, eyes blazing. "Why am I not to treat you? Put it into words."

Riker narrowed his eyes. Her emotions were clear enough now, a mix of anger and concern.

"*Imzadi*—" he started, reaching for her cheek.

"No, Will." She caught him by the wrist and held him in place. "Tell me why."

Why such a fuss? He searched her face, her dark eyes. The unconcealed anxiety inside them. He twisted his wrist a little, not like the way he'd escaped Worf — just so he could grab her hand and rub a circle against the base of her thumb. Skin on skin, rhythmic and soothing and slow. The anxiety in her eyes eased a little.

"You're my first," Riker said softly. "You know that."

"But is that *why* I can't treat you?" Deanna asked, desperately trying to lead him to the answer. "Or is it something else?"

"Does it *need* to be something else?"

"Yes, Will," she said firmly. "I've been your first since the moment we met. And you've been mine. But that's never stopped me from counseling you in the past."

She was right on that. She'd given him so many clues that the answer should have been obvious — and he was used to answers materializing in his mind after enough time. He would sit back, listen, observe, and in the background of his brain, all the threads would come together on their own, instinctual and smooth. But it just wasn't happening. He shifted in his seat and leaned a little closer, his ankle brushing against hers.

"Deanna," he said softly, his breath brushing over her lips.

She hesitated. For a moment she looked like a frightened animal. Like... and Riker closed his eyes against an unwanted image of a sled dog, of a hunting rifle, archaic and violent and loud.

"Will," said Deanna, her voice trembling. "What—"

She'd seen. She'd seen, and Riker's heart was racing, and when he raised her hand to his lips, when he eased her thumb into his mouth and closed his eyes, he could almost taste blood on her skin. Her breath hitched. Her eyes closed, too. She'd *seen*. There was copper between them now. He'd never wanted there to be copper.

He closed the gap between them and chased the memory of that sled dog away with a kiss.

"You're a little too satisfied with yourself," said Deanna an hour later, her voice sleepy and relaxed. Her head was resting on Riker's bare shoulder as she played absently with his chest hair, one arm trapped between their bodies. Riker inhaled deeply and let it out in a slow sigh.

"I'll graciously admit to just a touch of smugness," he said. He stretched out his arm and groped blindly for the blankets they'd shoved to the floor, tossing one over himself and Deanna.

"You're a natural at this, you know," she sighed. The puff of breath across his bare skin was so pleasant that Riker briefly considered a second round.

"Natural at...?" Riker prompted, expecting another joke, like earlier.

"Masking your wounds with humor and sex."

Riker wrinkled his nose, no longer considering Round 2. His arousal had suddenly and irrevocably soured, and when Deanna sat up and studied his face, she didn't look particularly repentant.

"That's what you do," said Deanna steadily, giving no quarter. "You distract any way you can. Whether it's by flirting, telling jokes, or fighting..."

And you fall for it, Riker thought bitterly, but he wrangled his tongue into obedience and managed not to project this terrible thought into Deanna's head. She gave him a dark look anyway, as if she'd sensed the tenor of his thoughts.

"You use sex to get what you want, Will," she said, striving for a professional tone and coming out clipped. Riker absorbed this, not breathing — no expression on his face — and then sat up. He fished around on the floor for his underwear.

"You have sex to get what you want," Deanna continued as he got dressed, "and what you *want*, Will, is to establish that *you* are wanted—"

He jerked his trousers up over his hips hard enough to rip the velcro snap.

"—without *connecting* yourself to anybody," Deanna continued, and now he could feel her emotions on top of his own, pummeling him. Sadness and regret and a deep unhealing wound, a memory of their failed date on Risa.

"Because you *need* to be alone," said Deanna heavily. "It's like you've been trained into it. Friends with everybody — because someone who has lots of friends must be fine, in your logic — but not particularly close to anyone."

You, Riker thought, practically screaming it as he shrugged into his tunic. *You. I'm close to you.*

Deanna shook her head. "And you have sex with everybody, too," she said firmly, ignoring his thoughts. "But you never date. You never fall in love. You don't—"

Imzadi, Will said, pleading now.

"You don't call back," said Deanna, her eyes searing into him. "You don't keep in touch. How long has it been since you reached out to Commander Ibsen, Will? He's not just your friend. I know what happened on Orion. And how long have you known Geordi? You were at the Academy together. Did you ever bother to send him a message, before you were both stationed here?"

"Deanna..." said Riker. He was reaching out his hand — mentally, not physically — and she refused to take it. Not until his body followed through. And Riker couldn't force himself to raise his hand for real. He tightened his fingers into a fist, nails piercing his palm.

"Am I inaccurate?" Deanna asked.

"You're out of line," said Riker, his voice rough.

Deanna stared at him, all her emotions laid bare. Then, with perfect Betazoid dignity, regal and refined, she adjusted the blankets and rested her chin on folded arms, eyes closed.

"I was waiting for you on Risa," she said. "I stayed at our rendezvous point for two days. You never showed, *imzadi*."

I know, Riker thought. Not projecting it, but not able to say it aloud either. He gathered the last of his things and hurtled out of the counselor's office, his heart pounding and his shirt still open at the chest. Crewmen stopped to stare at him as he flew by. *I know, I know, I know*, on endless repeat in his head.

He ignored them all. By the time he shouldered into the turbolift, his heart was thrumming, thin and thready, in his ears. A roar of blood took over his sense of hearing. It didn't occur to him that now, in privacy, he could fix his shirt. He was focused instead on the hot tingling sensation in his fingers and toes, the rasp of too-thin breath in his lungs.

And then the turbolift doors slid open, and there they were. Worf, Ibsen, Geordi, an entire pack of visiting officers and Enterprise gadflies, all of them chatting amongst each other like old friends. Their eyes fell on the sole occupant of the turbolift. His open shirt. The smell of sex.

"Sir—" said Worf, stepping forward.

"Now that's the Riker I know!" cried Ibsen, and a few of the Enterprise's officers cracked enormous grins. "Fellas, William Riker," said Ibsen to his crew. "This is the first officer I told you about. We served together on the Hood."

Riker fixed an unconvincing smile to his face and wandered into the crowd. He meant to push through, but his feet wouldn't obey him. Wouldn't move fast or decisively enough. One of Ibsen's men caught him by the hand for a friendly shake.

"You remember that old joke from the Hood, Will?" Ibsen called.

Riker mouthed the word 'no' but no sound came out. Geordi reached over to steady him with an alarmed "Sir!" that no one else seemed to notice.

"We always said the first officer's name isn't Will Riker," Ibsen announced. "It's Will-He-Ride-Her! And the answer is always yes—" He shot Riker a razor-sharp grin. "—regardless of who's asking. The first officer's *very* dedicated to running an equal-opportunity ship."

Riker, quite suddenly, couldn't hear the sound of his own heartbeat or harsh breath. All noise was replaced by the deafening crack of bone on bone as Ibsen slumped to the floor — and a buzzing, a ringing, that enveloped all other sounds. At first Riker thought, *I've done it. There goes my career. Two fights in one day.* And he looked down at his hands to assess the damage, the inevitable cracked knuckles, the split skin.

But his hands were clean. He wasn't the one who socked Ibsen in the jaw.

It was Worf.

All around Riker, the world was too loud and too fast, and he heard it all like he was underwater. Geordi, holding Worf back. Ibsen's friends picking him off the floor, wiping the blood from his face. The tumult of shocked whispers and commotion. The high drama of a schoolyard fight.

And something rose in Riker like a cold wind, and he was ten years old, standing on the edge of a cliff over the ocean, watching the orcas crest the waves. Feeling the cliffside crumble beneath his toes, watching little stones and clumps of dirty snow plummet to the sea. Thinking, *I could jump.*

He turned away. If anyone called his name or tried to stop him, he didn't hear it. With glacial calm, he returned to the turbolift and said, his own voice far away, "Take me to sickbay."

The doors closed on a grimacing Ibsen, his lip split by his own sharp teeth. Silence. Peace. That frozen wind battering at his lungs, clattering his rib cage. All his organs, one by one, going cold. Riker watched the numbers tick by on the turbolift screen. It spit him out at sickbay, head spinning, and he wandered straight through the open doors to a bright, quiet lobby. A few medics glanced up at him. If they said anything or made a move to help, Riker didn't see it. All he saw was the waiting room chair, empty, ready for a patient to sit down and be seen.

He sat.

He rested his hands on his thighs.

He noticed, vaguely, a blur of red hair and delicate bone structure winding toward him from the main office and wondered if someone had called her or if she just knew.

"Will?" said Beverly, her voice soft. She brushed his hair back, tilted his face to the light. He couldn't focus on her eyes; his gaze was stuck, somehow, on the cliffside over Valdez.

"I need a sedative," he said dully. "And I need a bed. Here. And somebody to—"

Beverly's concerned eyes flitted over his face.

"And somebody to ... to escort me to and from the head," Riker finished, his voice shaking. "To make sure I don't..."

Understanding hardened her features. All business now. She put both hands on his shoulders gently, as if to hold him in place. Without brushing her skin against his, she sealed his shirt for him. Brusque and clinical, she dressed her patient and put his hair into order, and then she tilted his head up and forced him to look her in the eye.

"I need to call Jean-Luc," she told him. That cut through the fog, but only a little.

"I don't want him here," Riker said, voice rough.

"I know you don't, Will, but—"

But what? Why had she stopped talking? And so abruptly — cut herself off, like she sometimes did when she saw something bad on the scans. Only she wasn't scanning anything. She was just watching him, her face pinched and her lips set in a thin line.

"What?" Will asked. He saw Deanna in bed, naked, refusing to look him in the eye. Worf's eyes flashing with anger. Ibsen covered in his own blood. The sled dog. The cliff. "You're pissed at me, too?"

"I'm not pissed at you," she said quietly. "No one's pissed at you, Will."

"Could've fooled me. So if you're not pissed, then what?"

"Will..." She hesitated and went to the nearest sink, wetting a thin slip of gauze beneath the faucet.

"I'm here for help," Riker said almost accusingly, that cold wind swelling and freezing his lungs. "Isn't that what you wanted me to do? Come here when I needed help."

She didn't answer. That same fury that almost made him hit Worf was back, joining the cold wind. Ice and fire, liquid heat burning up his veins and numbing his toes. He kept it all locked up, still quiet and dignified, like a true Starfleet officer.

"So give me a sedative," he said, almost calmly, heart pounding. "I'm asking for a sedative."

Beverly came back, her lips pursed, and she pressed the warm, wet square of gauze against his cheek. Will startled, his hand coming up to cup hers, and went still.

"Let me help you," she said.

"That's what I'm asking," he said, genuinely confused.

"Not with the sedative," said Beverly. She brushed her thumb against his cheekbone through the strip of gauze. "Will. You're crying."

He squeezed her hand tight enough to make her bones creak, stilling the rag. Then he loosened his grip at once, a silent apology for the instinct that made him stop her. Gradually, Beverly pulled away and let him take the gauze so he could wash his own face. He dabbed at his eyes surreptitiously, to confirm she wasn't lying, but his fingers came away wet, and now his vision was blurring and he felt the sting of tears that he didn't notice before. When did he start crying? How could he *start* crying and not even notice?

"Are you afraid you'll hurt yourself?" Beverly asked, and suddenly Will's throat was tight. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't think of any jokes, and he couldn't seduce or fight *Beverly*. Suddenly he felt tiny and out of control. No options. He just nodded his head and took a sharp, shaky breath. "When was the last time you had something to eat?" Beverly asked. "I know you've been helping out in Ten-Forward, but you still look thin."

He gave a miserable, silent shrug.

"And the last time you slept?"

He shook his head. He'd gone mute, and the realization made him flush with shame. He used to do this as a kid sometimes. Pretend he couldn't talk. Make everyone worry about him. Piss his father off.

“Breathe, Will,” Beverly said, squeezing his arm. “I’m going to give you that sedative now, like you asked, and then I’m going to give you a nutritional supplement too. You’ll just feel a slight pinch.”

Liar, he wanted to say. And he wanted to say it as a joke — make her smile. But his jaw tightened and no words came out. His tongue was like lead. The hypospray sank its jaws into his neck with a hiss — a sensation like a thousand needles sinking into his skin. Not unlike the ice-hot pain of the water in the river when it swallowed him whole.

Beverly helped him stand. She eased him to the nearest private room, onto the empty bed. He was vaguely aware of a warm blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He watched through bleary eyes as she unlaced his boots and pulled them from his feet. Suddenly he was a child again, in the anbo-jytsu dojo, sobbing helplessly because he couldn’t feel his legs. The memory was so vivid Riker could hear the sobs, and he couldn’t be sure whether they were just a memory or if he’d truly lost all dignity and started crying aloud. As his limbs grew heavier and his breathing evened out, he glanced at the open door and thought he saw Deanna — felt her mind brush against his own — and Picard, and instead of panic or anger he just felt drained. His hand stretched out of his own accord, reaching for them, and in a dim vague sense, Will was surprised. He’d been hospitalized so many times as a child. But he’d never reached for anyone before.

“He’s sleeping,” Beverly said from a distance, her voice like cotton in his ears.

And Will was.

Chapter 20

“Just be careful,” Riker said. “Some of these women can emit pheromones so powerful your head won’t be straight for weeks.”

He said this even as one Orion woman trailed her fingers down his chest and another buried her face against his neck — not quite kissing, but letting her lips hover and her breath warm his skin. Riker pretended not to notice.

“I don’t think I like Orion girls,” Ibsen said. He jerked his arm out of the grasp of one.

“Everyone likes Orion girls,” said Riker cheerfully. “Ladies, can you show us to our room?”

There was an ornate song and dance as Riker and the Orion girls silently and flirtatiously fought over who would carry the bags and who would lead the way. Riker won, and he and Ibsen trailed behind the girls, each of them carrying a suitcase and studying the near-naked bodies sashaying ahead of them. It was only when they reached their floor of the hotel that Ibsen glanced sideways and realized he and Riker weren’t necessarily studying the girls in the same way. There was a dark, hard edge to Riker’s eyes.

“You see it too?” Riker said, his lips barely moving.

“Yes,” Ibsen lied. He turned back to the girls and studied them closer. There. On the leader’s lower back, there was a slim tattoo, some sort of local symbol. What did it mean? Surreptitiously, Ibsen checked his padd.

It wasn’t in the database, but there were others like it. Big-name pirates and local slavers used tattoos just like these to brand their ... ‘product.’ Heart dropping, Ibsen stowed his padd and tried to look natural. When the girls located Ibsen’s and Riker’s shared room, they leaned against the door, taking up the most seductive pose each of them could think of and emitting a powerful scent, fragrant and pungent, alluring and repulsive, all at once.

“Thanks, ladies,” said Riker brightly. He pushed past them, gamely ignoring the way their hands trailed over his body, and with a shudder, Ibsen followed. It took an immense amount of effort to close the door in their pouting faces. That scent wound its way into his blood and weakened every muscle ... but he did get the door shut, and when he turned around, Riker was shaking out his arms as if he felt the same chill.

“I’m not a fan,” Ibsen said.

“You know, Mike, sometimes the Prime Directive...” Riker shivered. Jittery now, he paced the hotel room and fiddled with everything he touched, both of them surging with leftover adrenaline. “What a world. In this day and age...”

Ibsen slumped onto his bed and pulled his padd out. With his cheek resting uncomfortably on his shoulder, he reviewed the files he’d neglected on the way here. Slavery and piracy pervaded Orion and all its surrounding systems, where the raiders liked to roam. The women were capable of emitting strong pheromones that could overwhelm any human male ... and Ibsen couldn’t figure out if that was a nightmare or a dream. He chewed his thumbnail and glanced up at Riker, who had positioned himself by the hotel window.

“There’s a horde of girls out there,” Riker muttered, his tone unreadable. “I bet whoever seduces the Starfleet officers gets a reward.”

“You think?”

Riker turned and raised his eyebrows. Ibsen studied his face.

“Are you going to bed one, then?” Ibsen asked.

“They’re not *all* slaves. Plenty of these women don’t have tattoos.”

“You’re a pig,” Ibsen said. He turned back to his padd with a grunt. “When’s our first meeting?”

“The chief said he’d meet us in the hotel bar at 1800,” Riker said, twitching the curtains back. He raised one hand in a jaunty wave and grinned at a lady in the courtyard below. “1800,” Riker mused. “Four hours...”

“Just go,” said Ibsen wearily. “Try not to get kidnapped.”

Riker popped him a cheeky salute and practically bolted out the door. In silence, Ibsen studied the Starfleet files on Orion women and the pirate chief he and Riker were scheduled to negotiate with later today. There were articles galore about those infamous pheromones: irresistible, they said. A human man, according to the Federation’s legal team, could not consent to sex with an Orion female, or at least not one of the A-type. And yet Riker, knowing this, had fairly leapt at the chance to be raped. Ibsen snorted to himself and darkened his padd.

Well, he might as well explore the hotel bar. He just hoped it wasn’t teeming with locals at this hour.

The Orion girls were a little too willing and eager for his tastes.

It was past midnight when they made it back to their hotel room. The negotiations with the pirate chief had gone neither well nor poorly — it was still too early to tell what the result might be. But the bar was packed with supple Orion bodies, some enslaved but most of them free, and now that he was away from the fog of pheromones, Ibsen had a pounding headache and a not-so-hidden anger bubbling below the surface.

Aggression, the files said. That was one of the side effects of Orion pheromone exposure. Well, he was definitely feeling it ... but at his side, Riker was moving like a drunk man, obnoxiously loose-limbed and giggly as he unlocked the hotel room.

“Exhausted!” he declared as he stumbled inside. He left Ibsen to close the door, a sour look twisting his features, while Riker flopped onto his bed fully clothed. “Three ... no, four of them,” Riker said, voice muffled by the blankets.

“Congratulations.”

“All at once. God, it was heady.” Riker turned his head, face glowing, hair ruffled, and gave Ibsen one of his sparkly-eyed looks that made all the women of the Hood swoon. “You look grumpy, Mike.”

Ibsen yanked his jacket off and threw it to the ground. Slowly, the smile on Riker’s face faded and he turned away, sensing the tension in the air. Good. If he spoke again, Ibsen might blow ... and god, he knew it was just the pheromones. With a shaky sigh, Ibsen sat on the edge of his bed, half-dressed, and ran his fingers through his hair.

Calm down, he ordered himself. This isn’t you.

But his heart was pounding, and his breath was coming fast. And those were classic signs of pheromone intoxication. And his skin was hot to the touch, and he wanted desperately to punch something, to get rid of all those energy somehow.

Across the room, Riker reached out to trail his fingers through the beams of moonlight coming through his window. He watched the light dapple his skin and laughed softly, almost inaudibly. Oblivious to Ibsen’s anger. To his pain.

Three years’ worth of resentments boiled over.

“Do you give a shit,” Ibsen asked, his voice dark and low, “about anyone except yourself?”

Startled, Riker glanced over his shoulder and let his hand drop. “Mike?”

“*Your* career, *your* pleasure.” Ibsen jumped to his feet and relished the way his muscles tensed in his thighs. But it wasn’t enough. He needed something bigger: the full-body muscle strain of mountain climbing, maybe, might just be enough to sate this urge for movement. For exercise. “You’ve fucked everyone on the Hood and that wasn’t enough for you. You had to fuck everyone in the bar, too.”

Riker’s eyes darted over Ibsen’s face. There was no mirth in those eyes now. He twisted his hips and rolled over in bed, reaching for his communicator, but Ibsen got there first. He tossed the communicator across the room so hard it hit the wall with a crack.

“Mike,” said Riker in an infuriatingly calm voice, “it’s the pheromones. You’re not yourself.”

Ibsen closed his fingers around Riker’s collar and jerked him into a sitting position, their heads nearly crashing against each other. Riker tightened his lips and grabbed Ibsen, gently, by the wrists, just to maintain some control.

“First officer,” Ibsen sneered. “Everyone’s favorite.”

“Mike, if you really think I’ve fucked everyone on the Hood, I—”

Riker’s head snapped back against the headboard. His lips parted in a cry of pain, and it was only when he curled in on himself, clutching his head, that Ibsen realized he’d been the one to slam Riker back. Where there should have been shame, he felt only a sense of victory. A longing for more.

“I-I’m flattered,” Riker finished, striving for his usual humorous tone. “But five in one day? Even I don’t have that much energy.”

Ibsen grabbed Riker by the shirt front and shook him. He jumped up on Riker’s bed, strong thighs coming down on either side of Riker’s hips, pinning him in place. Riker saw the next blow coming and got his hands up over his face in time to block it, but the next one knocked his hands askew, and the third one caught him square across the cheek. He turned his head with another cry.

“Mike—”

Another blow. A split lip. A dash of blood. Strong hands circled Ibsen’s wrists and wrestled to keep him in place, and for a moment he lost his balance and he and Riker crashed to the mattress in a tangle of limbs.

“Mike, goddammit, just—”

Ibsen’s elbow caught Riker in the chin. Riker spat a glob of blood onto the bedsheets, and in that moment of distraction, Ibsen got him by the collar and twisted him onto his stomach. His hands moved of his own accord, one pinning Riker down, cinching his wrists together — and the other snaked beneath Riker’s body, between his legs, and squeezed his cock in an iron grip. Riker went still. His breath puffed out in a startled, silent gasp.

“You’re not even hard,” Ibsen said, disgusted. His heartbeat pounded in his ears.

“Don’t do this,” said Riker, his voice shaking. He wasn’t struggling now. His body was limp beneath Ibsen’s — submissive. Like the Orion girls, Ibsen thought, and his temper was back.

“Fight back,” he said roughly, “or I’ll tear your dick off.”

“I’m not going to fight you, Mike. You’re not yourself. You need to call sickbay—”

Ibsen dug his fingers into Riker’s soft cock and twisted, and with a strangled shout, Riker bucked against his hand, curled in on himself, tried desperately to squirm away. All of Ibsen’s weight bore down on him and kept him trapped, but now at least he was struggling again, his face losing all color when Ibsen twisted again. Riker, with a powerful, animalistic surge of adrenaline, managed to buck Ibsen off-balance — just

long enough to reach the edge of the mattress and vomit over the side. A weak stream of alcohol and bile pooled on the floor, and Ibsen watched, cool, dispassionate, and disgusted, until the stream had almost ended. Then he grabbed Riker by the hair and yanked him back, face-down in the bed sheets.

“Mike—” Riker said, his voice raw, saliva wetting the sheets near his face.

Ibsen dug his fingers into Riker’s waistband and yanked his trousers down. Riker’s bare skin burned hot against his hand; the smell of sex was thick, unwashed and fresh and trapped in Riker’s trousers until now. His cock was still soft, but it started to fill out when Ibsen cradled it, cupped it in his palm.

“Okay,” said Riker in a breath.

Ibsen hardly heard him. He’d never fucked a man before. Never been interested. But he liked the way Riker tensed and fought — reflexively — when he lifted his hips and dragged him closer.

“I said okay!” Riker shouted, his hands clenched in the bed sheets. “Mike, you can—”

Ibsen unlatched his own trousers, his cock straining. He shoved forward — not in — just resting against Riker’s body, that unnatural heat stealing his breath and making him go still. His heartbeat was racing so fast now that he shivered against Riker and lost his strength. Slowly, gently, Riker turned, his half-hard cock bobbing against Ibsen’s. His hands found Ibsen’s shoulders, his shirt-front, and eased it open — broad palms against Ibsen’s chest, long fingers tracing over his nipples. Riker eased down onto his back — he pulled Ibsen against him — kissed his exposed throat, hooked one ankle around his hips, brought their bodies flush.

It wasn’t sex. There was no penetration. It wasn’t the surge of energy and exertion that Ibsen needed. It was just his cock against Riker’s, and a series of soft, gentle kisses, and all that overwhelming heat and touch. Ibsen’s brain was too foggy to think straight, his heart rate too fast and thready for him to take control. He was still on top, but now he was the one who felt trapped.

And he came with a whimper, hot and sticky against Riker’s stomach, just from Riker running his fingers through Ibsen’s hair.

In the morning, the effect of the pheromones had faded, and the evidence of what Ibsen had done was clear. Riker’s bed sheets were a mess of vomit and cum, blood and the faint scent of urine, like one or both of them had succumbed to alcohol and Orion pheromones and wet the bed. Ibsen’s memories were swirling behind a cloud of sensation and desire. He dressed in silence, jaw clamped tight — trapped the scent of sex beneath his Starfleet uniform while Riker showered. Alone in the hotel room, Ibsen listened to the spray of water and stared at the stains on Riker’s bed sheets. A picture of pain, of fear, of lust.

He sat down heavily on the edge of his own pristine bed. By the time Riker emerged from the shower, Ibsen’s legs were trembling ... and Riker was put together, fresh and smiling, dabbing at his split lip. He looked the part of a perfect Starfleet officer, a little roguish, a lot fucked-out, but put-together and prepared to face the day.

“Ready to go?” he asked Ibsen cheerfully enough.

Ibsen stared at him. Riker’s smile wavered, fractured into something like concern.

“Mike?” he said. He followed Ibsen’s gaze to the other bed. “Oh.”

“I raped you,” said Ibsen, and his voice was calm, but now his entire body was shaking like a leaf. His career. If Riker told ... if this got out ... he imagined his friends reading the news, his mother hearing about it back home, and his vision blurred.

“Hey...” Riker’s voice was soft as he knelt in front of Ibsen’s. Gentle hands clutched Ibsen’s forearms and rubbed soothing circles into his skin. “Mike. That wasn’t rape.”

Ibsen made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a sob.

“It wasn’t rape,” Riker insisted. “You’re my best friend, Mike. This is just what friends do. They look for comfort in each other. They make love. We...”

Ibsen surged to his feet, knocking Riker back on his ass. “We didn’t *make love*, Will,” he said harshly, shame giving way to anger. “Christ, listen to yourself. Look at your bed sheets!”

Riker held his hands up in a placating gesture. An infuriating smirk twisted his lips. “Okay, so it was a little messy. That happens sometimes.” He clambered to his feet. At first he didn’t touch Mike. He just straightened his uniform jacket and eyed Ibsen from the side. Then, unwisely, he stepped closer — maybe drawn in by Ibsen’s trembling. Maybe compelled to comfort his friend. “I’m not gonna tell anyone, Mike. You know I’m not a rat. You didn’t do anything wrong—”

Ibsen expected himself to punch Riker. He felt the surge of anger and knew what would happen. His fist would lance out of its own volition. His knuckles would crack against Riker’s jaw. Another charge for the inevitable court-martial. But instead, he watched from a distance as his fingers traced Riker’s split lip. As his hands dug into that wound and pried it open, making fresh blood flow. As Riker closed his eyes and winced against the sting ... but let Ibsen hurt him, without putting up a fight.

Blood trickled down Riker’s chin. The anger in Ibsen’s chest turned cold and he let his hands fall, no longer trembling quite so badly. Riker wiped the blood away.

“You need to get laid more often,” he said, pretending not to see that Ibsen was crying. He slapped Ibsen on the shoulder — comforting, distant, platonic, like one brother to the next. Then he pulled him into a hug, stomach to stomach and hip to hip, and he guided Ibsen down

until his face was buried in Riker's shoulder like a child clinging to his father. "I liked it," said Riker softly. "Really. I'd do it again in a heartbeat, Mike. Don't cry."

Despair washed through Ibsen, so strong he couldn't speak.

"Come on," Riker said. His palm skimmed down between Ibsen's shoulder blades and over his sides, brisk and comforting. "Let's go."

They beamed up only when Ibsen had cleaned the evidence of tears from his cheeks. Riker's split lip was still burning, still raw. And when they arrived on the U.S.S. Hood, one of them was drained and exhausted, and the other was effervescent, laughing and dropping sly hints about Orion pheromones whenever anyone asked him how it went.

"And how exactly did you manage to split your lip?" the captain asked.

Riker grinned. Ibsen dropped his eyes to the floor.

He got to listen to Riker lie for him. After everything he'd done, all the memories he couldn't burn away, his loss of control and Riker's easygoing acceptance, his loss of dignity and Riker's effortless poise ... after all that humiliation, both within him and without, he got to listen to Riker lie.

Chapter 21

For just a moment, when Riker woke, his father was standing at the foot of his bed.

It wasn't Kyle Riker, the distinguished little gentleman who stood tall on Risa. That man was a head shorter than his son, gray-haired and defensive, too aware of his decline. No. The man at the foot of Will's bed was Kyle Riker as he had been when Will was just a child: a great bear of a man, athletic and vital, with flashing eyes and a strong no-nonsense voice that sometimes left other adults quivering in their seats.

And beside him, diminutive and bone-thin, was Mr. Shugak.

Will stared, his vision blurry. His teeth were glued together. Now he knew this was a dream. It was a recurring nightmare he'd had since he was a child: Mr. Shugak with blood streaming from his forehead and clotting in his eyelashes. Mr. Shugak, his lips parted and a terrible moan of pain coming from between his teeth. It had no basis in fact; even now, thirty years later, Mr. Shugak was alive and well in Valdez, Alaska. But in Will's dreams, over and over again, he was seven years old and hiding beneath his covers, not at his house but at the Shugaks', the scent of unfamiliar detergent and old musty quilts filling his lungs. In his dreams, he was forever listening to Mr. Shugak confront his father downstairs. The raised voices. Mr. Shugak's stern tone breaking, getting wilder, more desperate.

In real life, Will had fallen asleep while they were still fighting. He'd dreamed of a hammer cracking down on Mr. Shugak's skull, of a walking corpse shambling into the guest room and tearing at Will's blankets, begging him wordlessly for help. But in reality, his father had picked him up and bundled him in Mrs. Shugak's family quilt, and he'd taken Will home without any bloodshed.

It had been years since Will had this dream. At the foot of his bed, blood trickled from Mr. Shugak's forehead and into his open mouth, choking him. The noise of protest Will made got trapped in his throat and came out as a dreadful whine. Then Kyle raised his hand and Will flinched, his eyes snapping shut, and when he opened them again, his father wasn't there. Mr. Shugak was gone. The man at the foot of his bed...

...It was Petty Officer Texar.

"The sedative's still working on you," said Texar apologetically, turning off his scanner. He reached for a hypospray and placed it gently against Riker's neck. With a hiss, the fog over Riker's brain lifted and the edges of the room became a little sharper. "Slightly elevated heart rate and breathing, but nothing to worry about. Do you need the head, sir?" Texar asked.

Did he? Christ, he'd nearly pissed himself when he thought... Riker raised himself up on his elbows, heart still pounding at a dull thud. Only when he was sitting up straight did all his memories flood back in. The near-fight with Worf, Ibsen going down in the hall, his fit of tears in front of Beverly. And Deanna...

"Yes," he said, his voice like wet cotton. He grimaced and ran his tongue over his teeth. "Do I have a toothbrush?"

"I can get you a hygiene bucket here in a second, sir. Let's get you to the head first."

Riker grunted in agreement. As he stood, with Texar at his elbow, he glanced through the narrow window on his door. Out in the lobby, Captain Picard stood with his back to Riker's room, polished and in-uniform as he spoke with Crusher and Troi. Deanna's dark eyes darted over to Riker as if she could sense he'd woken, and she met his gaze just briefly before looking away.

"Shit," Riker mumbled.

"Sir?" Texar said, looking alarmed.

"How long has he been waiting?"

Texar steered Riker toward the head and shot a quick look back to the lobby. "Captain Picard, sir?"

"Yes."

"I think he just arrived." As they passed through the head door, Texar let go of Riker's arm and stopped walking. He stood in the doorway, hands in his pockets and eyes averted. It was a private head with a spacious walk-in shower instead of a tub and a commode that looked more like a gaping maw than a toilet. Riker grimaced at it and scrubbed a hand through his hair.

You asked for this, he reminded himself. And he was all too conscious of the glass mirror over the bathroom sink. Breakable, if one tried hard enough. And he remembered the cold wind that rose inside him yesterday, that tilt of gravity like he was on the cliffside again, watching loose pieces of earth crumble beneath his toes.

You asked for this.

Riker took a deep breath and opened his trousers. Texar made an exaggerated point not to look.

"I heard there's a bet in the lower decks about, ah, my size," said Riker over the trickle of urine.

"If there is," said Texar carefully, "then it's a highly inappropriate bet, sir. No one should be speculating on anyone else's...ah...genitalia...in Starfleet."

"Probably not." Riker paused. "But what's the standing bet?"

"Twenty-two centimeters, sir," said Texar, still staring at the wall.

That much? Yeesh. Good thing Texar wasn't looking. Riker finished up and tucked himself away, his heartbeat a little slower now. He was washing his face in the bathroom sink when a med tech came in with a fresh set of clothes and the so-called hygiene bucket, a soft, biodegradable container filled with travel-sized toiletries and a hand towel too small for Riker to hang himself on. And also, therefore, too small to dry much except his dripping face.

"How long can I have in the shower?" Riker asked.

"As long as you like, sir," Texar said.

"And you'll watch me?"

"Yes, sir," said Texar.

Riker draped the little hand towel over the sink and considered making a joke — asking Texar to go to his quarters and fetch him his grandmother's towel from the head. But his sense of decency prevailed, wounded as it was. He dropped yesterday's civvies on the bathroom floor with a deliberate lack of shyness and stepped into the shower, hyper-aware of Texar's eyes — not that they *were* on him, but that they *could* be.

"Did you get in trouble?" asked Riker, his voice almost lost beneath the spray of warm water.

"Sir?"

"For my little prank. With my grandmother's quilt."

No answer. When Riker turned to reach for the soap in his hygiene bucket, he caught a glimpse of Texar's face, troubled and dark.

"You did," said Riker, dismayed. "I'm sorry."

"I didn't get in trouble, sir," said Texar softly, keeping his eyes on Riker's bare feet. "Dr. Crusher said she might have fallen for it, too, if you'd asked her."

Hm. Riker turned back to the shower-head, scrubbing suds of soap over his chest and down his arms. He put his head beneath the spray and let the water trickle through his hair, down the line of his nose, into his ears, until he could hear nothing but his own heartbeat and it was easier to pretend Texar wasn't there. Would it be better or worse to have Worf back? Better, he decided. At least he could tease Worf with a clear conscience. Except—

I am pleased he can no longer harm innocents. Even those who wish to testify on his behalf.

Okay, maybe not Worf. Riker washed the soap out of his hair with numb fingers and a tight jaw. Suddenly, he was glad Texar wasn't the small-talk type. Riker probably couldn't answer him if he wanted to; his tongue had that dull lead feeling to it, heavy and insensate like a block of ingots lying in some dusty cave. Riker hit the button to stop the water and palmed the excess off his body with the heel of his hand.

"Hungry, sir?" asked Texar, handing him the scrap of cloth that sickbay called a towel.

Riker shrugged. He couldn't muster up the energy for words. By the time he dried his hair, the towel was soaked, and he made a face as he scrubbed it over the rest of his body — practically transparent by the time he got through with it. There was no underwear in the stack of hospital pajamas provided for him, so he shrugged into them commando and tried to find a way to adjust himself so the outline of his dick wouldn't be obscenely visible through the fabric.

"You'll have a robe, sir," said Texar to the floor, pretending not to see Riker's conundrum.

Well, thank God for small favors.

"And your food is here, when you're ready."

Ugh. Riker took his time brushing his teeth, letting the bristles work at his gums until his entire mouth ached. And he tried to comb his hair with his fingers, so it looked a little less disheveled — more like a Starfleet officer and less like some poor sod trapped in a mental asylum in a critically-acclaimed drama.

And when he emerged, back into his private room/self-imposed prison cell, Guinan was waiting for him with a smile. She sat at Riker's card table, a little breakfast tray resting before her.

"Morning, sunshine," she said.

"Guinan, light of my life!" Riker heard himself say, the lead tongue dissolving. He held his arms out for her, instinctively shifting into a persona that rang false. He caught himself somewhere halfway through the gesture and froze ... and Guinan cocked her head at him, just slightly, and studied his face until he let his arms fall to his side.

"You look tired, Will," she said.

"Don't know why. I had the best sleep of my life — medically-induced, of course." He glanced around and spotted the robe Texar had promised him, draped over his unmade bed. Riker sent up a silent prayer of thanks as he pulled it on and cinched it around his waist. "What are you doing here?" he asked Guinan. "It's a little early for visitors."

Guinan indicated the tray of food. Light stuff. Toasted bread with a spicy green spread and glistening pieces of diced fruits and vegetables piled on top. Riker's stomach soured at the sight of it.

“You’re in charge of making me eat,” he said.

“Do you need to be forced?” asked Guinan mildly. “Aren’t you hungry? I’d say it’s been at least sixteen hours since your last meal.”

“I snack a lot,” said Riker, tossing out the lie by reflex. He sank into the empty chair on the other side of the card table and studied the tray, arms crossed tight over his middle. The sedative was still working on him, he decided. It made his stomach feel like an old-fashioned musket ball. Rusty and heavy enough to weigh his body down. He picked up one piece of toast with a reluctance he couldn’t hide.

“Take as long as you like,” Guinan said. “I know Jean-Luc is here to see you.”

“The implication here is that I want to avoid him,” Riker noted. “Why would I want to avoid him?”

“You tell me.”

Riddles. Riker forced himself to take a bite. The spicy green spread clung to the roof of his mouth, flavored with a mix of Terran spices and the subtle earthy flavor of a Klingon fruit that Worf liked and most humans considered unbearably bland. It mixed well with the spices though, and brought out a hint of something that reminded him vaguely of mushrooms and fish.

“He can be a little brusque sometimes,” said Guinan easily. She cast a mysterious smile toward the door — the lobby, where Picard was waiting. “Have you spoken to him yet?”

“A few days ago. Not recently.”

“Well, I’m sure it’ll be terrible,” Guinan said with a sparkle in her eye. Riker snorted and took another tiny bite, this time letting the diced fruit pop against his tongue. “Tyrannical. Totally unsympathetic. You know how he is.”

“Absolutely,” said Riker, losing some of the tension in his shoulders.

“He’ll toss you out of an airlock, is my bet.”

“Too quick,” Riker said. “I think he’ll pull the Picard Maneuver.”

Guinan gave him a quizzical grin. “He’ll mirror his ship?”

“No, the real Picard Maneuver. A plastic bag over the head. Didn’t you ever hear how he got control of the Stargazer?”

Guinan laughed, and Riker couldn’t help but smile a little. He set his half-eaten toast down and sat back with a sigh, more relaxed now. Although he did feel a little guilty about Texar, who was standing in the corner with a stricken look on his pale face.

“Guinan’s just setting me at ease with a little teasing,” Riker told him. “The captain’s no tyrant. It’ll be fine.”

Guinan picked up the second piece of toast and helped herself to a bite. While she chewed, she eyed Riker, knowing and affectionate, and he had to look away. His cheeks heated as he picked at the piece of bread he’d already half-eaten. Guinan didn’t speak, but he could almost hear her voice in his head. She’d ask him something like: *Do you always comfort others when you want to comfort yourself?*

Riker sighed. He scrubbed a hand through his drying hair and felt his face crease. It took so much effort to keep that smooth, pleasant expression up.

“Thanks for the breakfast, Guinan,” he said to the table, unable to meet her eyes.

“It’s no trouble,” Guinan said. “And you can expect to see me at every meal, Will, until you get out of here. I miss my little kitchen helper.”

He gave her a strained smile. When she stood, that musket ball in his stomach came back with a vengeance, expanding to the size of a human skull and barreling up through his intestines to lodge in his lungs. He took a slow, whistling breath through his teeth as the door slid open and Guinan exited.

“Breathe, sir,” said Texar quietly.

“I’m breathing,” said Riker, his voice tight. He squinted against the harsh lights of sickbay and forced himself to keep staring at the door — to face Captain Picard as he stepped inside. Picard’s face was unreadable, as ever. His eyes shifted slowly from the half-eaten meal on Riker’s tray to Petty Officer Texar, stationed against the far wall.

“Dismissed, Petty Officer,” Picard said, his voice level. He crossed the room with his usual brisk pace, like this was an ordinary day on the bridge. He settled into Guinan’s empty seat like it was his command chair. He met Riker’s eyes plainly, like they were in Picard’s ready room discussing an away mission, as Texar left and the door hissed shut.

And then they were alone, and that unholy weight had settled somewhere in Riker’s rib cage, and he couldn’t control his expression for the life of him.

“I’m going to say something without filter,” Picard said. “I don’t want you to interrupt. And I don’t want to hear any rationalizations. This is something we’ve been dancing around for quite a while, Will, and I’m sick of dancing.”

Riker took another slow breath. He saw, but didn’t really feel it, when Picard’s fingers brushed against his. His hands were numb, and Picard seemed to sense it, because he curled his fingers back into a fist and stopped touching Riker entirely. His face didn’t soften, exactly, but his eyes did, that subtle gentleness that Riker had seen a million times before, and he knew he was about to hear something he didn’t want to.

So he closed his eyes. He focused on his breathing. He didn't bother to put up a mask.

"Your father raped you," Picard said from a distance. "You were a child."

The words washed over Riker's brain without effect. There was no electrical impulse in his mind to determine whether they were true or false, or to engineer an emotional response. The words just settled into the coils of his brain and dissolved.

But the next thing Picard said, the next unnecessary words ... those had an impact, alright. They were soft and barely audible. They were firm and inarguable, spoken like the captain of a starship, like a man who won't accept any debate. It was silly, really, because this next sentence was less offensive than the first two. It should have been easier to accept. Should have been. It wasn't. Because what Picard said dismantled the cheerful, unbothered, even-keeled William Riker persona from bow to stern and left absolutely nothing in its wake.

Simple, and irrefutable, Picard said:

"Anyone, Will, would be traumatized by that."

Chapter 22

The kennel's walls were made of tall boards of scrap wood. Smooth, no footholds (Will knew because he'd tried to climb them a million times). He and Rosie were tall enough now that they could unlatch the gate without asking for help, which Rosie's mom said was great (since they weren't running after her every ten minutes begging to see the dogs) and also worrying. Now Will and Rosie stood ankle-deep in the kennel's slush-and-mud floor, Will with his hands on his knees and Rosie squatting so they could see inside the doghouse.

It was dark in there, but through the scent of blood and something animalistic, through the shadows, Will could see an undulating movement. Wet and sleek, the newborn puppies squirmed around each other and pushed against their mother's stomach, looking for food.

"Can I name one?" Will asked.

"You can *have* one," Rosie said. "Mom said so."

"Really?" His heart leapt into his throat. Immediately, he knew which one he'd pick. Out of all those perfect husky puppies, there was just one with black spots on his ears and over his eye. If Rosie didn't want him ... but Will's throat closed up and he tightened his fingers on his jeans.

"Nah," he said. "I don't need one."

Rosie gave him a strange look over her shoulder. "I'm serious," she said. "You can take one."

"I know. But..." Not *I know.* Never *I know.* Will closed his eyes. "I mean, thank you, but I'm... not allowed."

He gave a jerky shrug when Rosie just stared at him, like she didn't think he was telling the truth. Her dark eyes scanned his face.

"Your dad won't let you?" she asked.

"He hates dogs," Will lied. Actually, Kyle Riker loved dogs. He didn't tell stories often, especially not about Starfleet, but when he was in the mood, he'd tell Will all about the dogs he'd loved and lost over the years. Will knew more stories about a red-coated collie he'd never met (named Sir) than he did about his own mom. Sir used to follow his dad to the grocery store when he was a kid, unleashed. And Sir would chew up Grandpa's shoes and when you tried to swat his nose with a roll of paper, he'd chew the paper too. And Sir liked to wear sweaters even though he was such a big dog, so he would share Kyle Riker's prep school sweaters and walk him to the school gates, and everyone would love that Kyle and Sir matched.

"Only stupid people hate dogs," said Rosie firmly.

"He's not stupid." Will crouched down a little further and craned his neck to see the puppies. "How many are there?"

"Six."

"Can I name the one with black spots?"

"You can *have* him," Rosie said, her jaw jutting out.

He wished she would stop saying that. Every time she did, he saw himself tucking this puppy into his sweater and carrying him on the walk home — or sleeping with the puppy curled against his stomach in bed — or splashing in the river with the puppy in the spring. In his wilder dreams he let himself imagine the puppy wearing his sweaters (when he was big enough) and following him to school. Will closed his eyes and kept his lips tightly shut against the overwhelming urge to say yes. He could feel Rosie watching him, ready to apply pressure...

"Rosie!" called a voice from inside. "It's time for dinner! Will—"

Rosie's mom appeared at the workshop window, a dusty pane of glass that looked out into the kennel. She rapped on the window and pushed it open a little.

"Will, are you staying?" she asked brusquely.

"No, ma'am."

"Alright, head on out, then. Rosie, wash up for supper."

The window clattered shut again. For a moment longer, Will and Rosie stayed in position by the doghouse, watching the puppies wiggle.

"They look like rats," Will muttered, and Rosie grinned at him.

"You never named yours."

"I'll name him Zephram," Will decided. Rosie made a face.

"What kind of name is *Zephram*?"

"It's the guy who invented the warp drive," Will said.

"What if it's a girl?"

"Zephramette."

Rosie pushed to her feet, giggling the whole time. "I thought you hated history," she said as she led him out of the kennel.

"I do," Will said. "But the warp drive isn't history. It's *cool*. And I have to know all about it or I won't pass my flight test."

Rosie shot a wistful look at the sky. "I wish Mom would let *me* go to flight school."

Will hesitated. He'd seen Rosie get sensitive about her grades before, but this wasn't that. She didn't look insulted or angry. Just sad.

"You'll get there," he said finally. "You'll blow me out of the sky."

"Definitely," Rosie agreed.

"Or we'll be flight buddies," said Will with a grin. "You'll be the pilot and I'll be—" He struck a feminine pose, one hand on his hip. "—the lady who brings everyone their drinks."

Rosie snorted and punched him on the shoulder. "Whatever."

"I'd make a good drink lady!" Will insisted. He stood up straight and arched his back a little, taking a few slow dignified steps toward Rosie, like he was wearing heels. In a cool city-girl accent, he proffered an imaginary tray to Rosie and said, "Bourbon, my dear, or a martini?"

Rosie's face creased with confusion, as if she didn't recognize those words. But before she could ask...

"*Rosie!*" Rosie's mom shouted from inside. Rosie whipped her head around to look over her shoulder, then turned back to Will with a grin.

"I gotta go."

"Sure," said Will, his stomach clenching. He was still standing there — still frozen from the shout — when Rosie disappeared through the side door. The kennel was around back, attached to the workshop but not to the house itself, and it faced the woods. So Will could go home through the trees without being seen ... but instead of leaving, he stood there with his hands in his pockets and watched the evening sky. Imagined flying there, in a little skyhopper, with Rosie as his copilot. And a little husky puppy named Zephram tucked into his flight vest, too. They could go anywhere. If they had a warp drive, they could even go to other planets. See the stars, like Kyle did. Will chewed the inside of his cheek until the flesh was raw and he tasted blood, and he stood there until the cold seeped through his jeans and left his hands numb even in his coat pockets. Then he finally moved.

But not to the woods. Not to home, where Dad was waiting. Instead, Will sneaked up to the kennel and dug his cold fingers into the metal latch. He slipped inside, unseen by anyone, and crouched down before the doghouse again.

This was weird.

He knew it was weird. If Rosie or her brothers came out and saw him hiding here ... but Will couldn't convince himself to leave. There was an old sheet of aluminum in the kennel, a little dirty but at least dry, and he dragged it over to the doghouse as quietly as he could. He sat on the sheet with his legs pulled up to his chest and watched the puppies feed. All around the kennel, in other doghouses, the adult huskies watched him, tongues lolling out of their mouths. Intelligent blue eyes met Will's whenever he glanced their way.

What are you doing here? they seemed to ask him. *You're not supposed to be here.*

And Will would say, *I'm Zephram's dad. I'm here for visitation.*

And he briefly entertained a daydream of himself at dog court, fighting for custody, while in real life he twisted a twig in the mud and watched the puppies fall asleep.

The sun was going down. Rosie and her family would be finishing dinner soon.

Will stayed.

The sun was down. Cold air turned his ears into painful blocks of ice. He might just get away with this. He might be able to live in Rosie's kennel forever. Dad wouldn't notice he was missing; Rosie would sneak him food. The dogs would keep him warm at night. Will wrapped his arms around his legs and closed his eyes, not exactly happy, not exactly sad. He would miss his room. The warmth of the kitchen. Cooking, and his orcas, and his model starships. But Rosie's family was nice, and the dog kennel wasn't bad, and in time...

In time, he knew, he'd have to leave, but Will couldn't force himself to go. He only shifted long past dark, when his legs were sore and his bladder was full and dinner had to be long-over. Rosie was probably in bed, or fighting with her brothers over what holo to watch. Will circled the dog kennel on stiff legs, stars twinkling overhead. He found a smelly corner of the kennel, where there was already a ton of clean-up needed — so no one would notice if he added to it — and then he undid his pants with cold-sore fingers. He had to hurry; he felt vaguely like a criminal, and the stream of urine sounded particularly loud as it pattered against the ground, and the cold air touched his backside and made the bruises and welts there sting more than unusual. But he was just about done, and shaking himself off, when he heard a sound that made his heart freeze in his chest.

A tapping at the workshop window.

Will couldn't breathe. He tucked himself away, hands numb, and fastened his jeans. He turned, feeling like he might vomit.

Rosie's mom was pushing the window open, her face contorted with confusion and disgust, and Will couldn't help it.

He started to cry.

"Will, come inside," said Rosie's mom, her voice stern. He'd heard her snap at her own kids a million times, but never at him, and the sound of it froze him in his tracks. "Will!" she snapped when he didn't move. "Now!"

Hot tears rolled down his cheeks. He stayed where he was, immobile, even though he knew it would just get him in more trouble. Rosie's mom saw he wasn't moving and slammed the window closed. He could hear the stomping steps she took to get through the workshop — the bang of the old screen door on its hinges — the metal scrape of the kennel's latch as she flung the gate open and stared down at him.

"Out," she said sharply. "Now."

Shaking like a leaf, Will stumbled out of the kennel and into the star-bright yard. Out here, he was visible from the house. Were Rosie and her brothers watching? Faces pressed to the windows, confused and disgusted like Rosie's mom? He started toward the woods and Rosie's mom closed her fingers around his arm in an iron grip.

"No," she said firmly. "You're not walking home. Come inside."

Will's breath hitched. She dragged him through the yard to the front door, and the lights were on inside, and he was sure Rosie could see him. A blast of warmth hit him as Rosie's mom pushed him into the mud room and kicked lightly at his boots, a silent order to take them off. Will did so, sobbing silently, his chest heaving as he worked at the buttons on his coat with numb fingers. Muttering to herself, still angry, Rosie's mom knelt before him and helped him take the coat off. Her face was red, her eyes dark. He'd never seen her so pissed before. Definitely not at him. She'd never let him back here — and he couldn't blame her — and she'd tell Rosie what he did, and then Rosie would think he was gross, weird — and Will glanced sideways down the darkened hall, praying that Rosie wasn't there to see, and as he turned, he pressed his lips tight against a whimper.

"Oh, Will," said Rosie's mom, suddenly sounding drained.

She pulled him into a hug.

Soft. Warm. Gentle. Her arms encircling him, her hands rubbing gentle circles on his back. Will froze again, eyes wide, unable to breathe. He didn't hug her back; he couldn't make his brain work, and if his brain didn't work then his hands definitely didn't, so there was no use ordering them to hug her. He just stood there, limp and unresponsive, like an idiot. And let her hug him, let her run her fingers through his hair and dry his tears while he stared at her in shock. His reputation was ruined, he thought miserably. Yesterday he'd been the fastest runner, the tallest kid in the class, the baseball All Star. The kid who got to leave class twice a day to join the high schoolers. Tomorrow he'd be someone different. The weird kid who hid in Rosie's kennel and peed in the corner. The kid who cried like a baby when he got caught. Will squeezed his eyes shut, no longer capable of looking Rosie's mom in the eye. He wanted to say he was sorry. He wanted to explain.

What came out, choked and small, was: "Are you gonna call my dad?"

And then Rosie's mom was hugging him again.

"We're going to warm you up first," she said quietly, her lips brushing his forehead as she held him close and rocked him. "We're going to get you a bath and something to eat. And we're going to see if we can do something about those — those cuts. Okay?"

"And then you'll call my dad?" asked Will, voice broken.

She didn't answer. He closed his eyes and let her rock him, praying she'd call anyone else instead. Mr. and Mrs. Shugak, maybe. Or he could just sleep here, with Rosie. But...

But she'd seen him with his pants down. She'd seen the welts.

She'd *seen*.

Chapter 23

Commander Riker was a popular guy.

Of course, Petty Officer Texar knew that already. He was new to the Enterprise, but he learned fast. When he first arrived, Riker was just the first officer to him. Someone to avoid, like the crew avoided all high-ranking officers; especially on his old ship, where the commanders and captains were the sourest lot you'd ever meet. But within a month Texar's view of Riker had changed from 'first officer' to 'that guy who plays trombone in Ten-Forward' and then to 'that guy with the killer Picard impression' and then 'that guy who gets all the girls.'

Still, *knowing* Riker was popular didn't compare to actually *seeing* it. During his single day in sickbay, Riker had been visited by no less than twenty-four crewmen and officers, and that wasn't counting Guinan and Picard.

"I think there's another one coming, sir," Texar said, peeking through the window.

"Okay," said Riker, his voice thick. Texar stood on tiptoe and watched as Counselor Troi glided across the sickbay lobby to speak with Dr. Crusher.

"It's Counselor Troi, sir."

Texar hoped this would cheer Riker up. He didn't know what was going on between his first officer and the counselor — he didn't think they were dating — but everyone knew they were at least best friends. They sat together in Ten-Forward and at every feasible command event, whether it was a play or a poetry recital. Texar himself had seen them walking arm-in-arm through the corridors once. But Riker just scrubbed at his face with the heel of his palm and turned his head away.

"Sir?"

"I know it's Troi," said Riker simply. "I'm done with visitors for today."

He'd been saying that since Picard. Riker had spent most of the day prone in bed with the sheets over his head, both to shield his eyes from the lights and try to hide the ceaseless trickle of tears. In the last hour or so, he'd moved to the card table, sitting upright, but the tears still came at a steady pace and Riker still refused to let anyone through the door. Texar had watched two dozen worried faces come and go, and now Counselor Troi met his eyes through the window. Her lips were parted, her eyebrows arcing upward in an expression of sadness so deep it cut Texar to the soul and tightened his throat. He swallowed hard and turned to face Riker.

"It might be a ... a professional capacity, sir," he said. "I'll check."

"Just comm—"

Texar hit the door release, and when Troi saw the slide of metal, she bolted forward at a jog. She met Texar before the doors had fully slotted into their sheaths.

"Will," she said in a melodic voice, and Texar knew what to expect — a rough denial, a bit of uncharacteristic rudeness, a crestfallen Counselor Troi. So all he could do was blink when Riker silently held out his hand and Troi hurried in to wrap her fingers around his. "*Imzadi*," she said.

And the two of them just... lapsed into silence.

Completely.

Texar stood at the door, his arms crossed and his brows furrowed. Before him, Riker and Troi stared into each other's eyes. Riker cracked a watery smile. Troi's evaluating look washed away into something like affection and concern. She brushed his hair back and he ducked his head — squeezed her hand — shrugged his shoulders. Troi let out a little sigh and settled back on her heels.

...And Texar got the distinct impression that they were *talking*, but he couldn't hear a damn word. Was he dismissed, then? Would the counselor escort Riker to the head if he needed it? ...Was that allowed? Texar shifted from foot to foot, hoping this slight movement might catch their attention, but Riker and Troi were focused so fully on each other it was like Texar had ceased to exist.

Then Troi laughed a little, trying to stifle it, and said, "Yes, I admit it." And Riker softened and said, "I thought so." And Texar tossed his hands up in the air, completely lost.

"I'll be outside, sir," he said — to thin air, he supposed.

Certainly nobody in Riker's room was listening.

A warrior does not run from battle. But this wasn't battle. And Worf wasn't running, exactly. He was simply ... not moving forward. He'd been standing outside of sickbay for twenty-nine minutes, pacing the halls or pretending to inspect the computer displays. Now he shifted from foot to foot and faced the stark white door, trying to convince himself to go inside.

Shamefully, the choice was made for him. Worf was about to turn on his heel and inspect the panels once again when the sickbay doors opened with a hiss. Beverly Crusher leaned on the frame and gave him a cool-eyed look.

"Are you coming in or not, Mr. Worf?"

Worf bristled, but he stepped inside without a word. He'd always hated sickbay, not just for what it represented, but because the lobby was such a wide-open space, surrounded by private rooms and closed doors where an assassin could theoretically hide and theoretically snipe you. Worf kept his shoulders up and his head on a swivel, carefully scrutinizing every medic who passed by.

Dr. Crusher, luckily, was used to this.

"Commander Riker is in Room 1-A," she said wearily. "He's got another visitor right now but don't be afraid to knock."

Worf took a step toward 1-A. Then Beverly's words caught up with him.

"I fear nothing," he shot over his shoulder.

"Of course, Mr. Worf."

He shook his head and crossed the lobby, peering through the window to 1-A. Riker was seated at the card table with Counselor Troi at his side, in uniform. The commander looked ... unwell. Cheeks swollen, eyes red, but pale and washed-out. He was speaking softly, his words inaudible through the glass, while Troi held him still and gingerly washed his face.

This was not something Worf should intrude in. He started to back away, half-relieved for an excuse and half-determined to come back tomorrow, when Riker was ready to face him as one warrior to another. But before he could take a single step, Riker's eyes flashed up to meet his own. Troi froze, her hand still cupping a wet rag to Riker's cheek. Then she turned her head and stared Worf right in the face.

No retreat now. Worf squared his shoulders and hit the door release.

"May I speak to you," he said flatly, rumbling it like a threat.

Troi blinked at him in alarm, but Riker at least seemed unsurprised. He slipped the rag out from under Troi's unmoving fingers and swept it over his face in one last cleansing stroke. He and Troi passed some sort of message between each other in that infuriating manner they had, and she pushed away from the table — passed Worf on her way to the door — gave his arm a comforting and most unnecessary squeeze before she left.

And then Riker and Worf were alone.

"You're the only visitor I've actually admitted," Riker said, setting the rag aside. His expression had smoothed out a little, and his shoulders were relaxed, leaving him more peaceful-looking than the last time they met. "Deanna kind of forced her way in — but don't tell her I said that."

"I won't," Worf said stiffly.

Riker scanned his face, ultra-serious, and then cracked a tiny smile. "Will you sit down?"

"I will stand," said Worf, sliding into parade rest near the door.

"You don't have to."

"I will stand," said Worf firmly.

Riker's smile disappeared. The column of his throat shifted as he swallowed. In silence, he tapped his fingertips against the table and let his eyes drift around the room, looking everywhere but at Worf. Worf's gut churned, and he kept trying to work the right words into his mouth, but they stayed lodged in his throat.

"I ought to apologize," said Riker finally, meeting Worf's eyes. He held Worf's gaze with the ease and strength of a first officer, despite the tear tracks on his cheeks. "I lost my temper in Ten-Forward. That was unacceptable. I—"

"I—"

They stumbled over each other's voices — and Worf's cheeks warmed, and Riker's eyes crinkled the way they always did when he was trying not to smile. He hesitated to see if Worf would speak, then gestured for Worf to take the lead.

"I must apologize as well," said Worf.

Riker tilted his chin down and studied Worf from beneath his eyelashes.

"What I said was unwarranted," Worf said. "And ... not for a subordinate to say to his commanding officer."

Riker seemed to find that funny. He huffed out a soft laugh and cast his gaze down to the table. "No, I suppose not. Don't worry, Worf. Captain Picard covered it thoroughly this morning."

His careful, even voice wavered a little, but his expression remained intact. He picked at the rag's rough weave, tearing off little pieces of string with his blunt nails.

"Are you facing any disciplinary charges?" Riker asked before Worf could put any of his conflicting emotions into words.

"Sir?"

"For Ibsen." And there was an unmistakably impish glitter in Riker's eyes, even though he kept his face straight. "Good right hook, by the way. You never told me you like to box."

"I was protecting my first officer, sir," said Worf.

"I didn't need protection. Not from Ibsen."

"I mean to say, I was protecting you by not informing you of my boxing habit," Worf said. "Had I told you, no doubt you would have suggested a match."

Riker barked out a genuine laugh, his head thrown back. "And you would have knocked my block off — is that what you're saying?"

Worf let his dignified silence speak for him. When Riker was done chuckling, he said,

"I am facing no disciplinary charges. Captain Picard has given me a three-month write-up. Assuming I make no further infractions, my record will be cleared by the time we reach Spolia."

Riker's smile softened. He nodded to himself and turned his attention back to the rag he was — slowly but surely — picking apart.

"You shouldn't have," he said eventually, his voice gruff.

"You cannot convince me I made the wrong decision," said Worf. His chest swelled as he took a deep breath to center himself. "As Lieutenant La Forge says — he had it coming."

Riker gave him an unreadable look, maybe a little amused, but a lot pained. "Is he still here?" he asked, his voice soft.

Worf let out his breath in a slow, silent sigh. "No, sir. That is why I visited. To inform you that Lieutenant Commander Ibsen and his crew have departed." He looked Riker square in the eyes and let the weight of his voice drop on the first officer's shoulders. "There is no one aboard the Enterprise now but our own crew."

Riker absorbed these words and gave a slow nod. The rag unraveled one piece at a time, and Riker absently wrapped a thin white thread around his thumb — tighter and tighter, until his skin turned white. Without a word, Worf stepped up and took the rag away. And now that he had nothing to do with his hands, Riker was adrift, his shoulders slumped. He stared at the blank white walls.

"Tell me something," he said, voice distant.

"Sir," said Worf.

Riker met his eyes. There was a no-nonsense set to his face, the same expression he got when coaching ensigns — or in the middle of a tense mission, where every order needed to be heeded, and heeded at once.

"Do you think I'm a coward?" Riker asked.

He was prepared for a 'yes', Worf could tell. And a 'yes' would not break him. It was what he expected; what he thought Worf believed. A 'yes' would only confirm what Riker already knew ... or thought he knew. But Worf stuffed the unraveling rag into his pocket and squared his jaw, meeting Riker's gaze.

"No, sir," he said firmly. "I do not."

Riker's lips parted. A line appeared between his eyebrows.

"And if you argue the point, sir," Worf continued, "I *will* give you a taste of that right hook."

When night cycle came around, Beverly crossed to the replicator and called up a sedative that would help Will sleep, relieve his anxiety, and dispel any nightmares. She wanted to do his evening assessment herself, and bringing him his pills would be a good excuse to do so. With a swirl of artificial color, she dissolved the medication into a cup of flavor-neutralizing water, cool and refreshing and specially designed to mask the bitter taste of medicine. With this in hand, she pushed through the door to Room 1-A, where she found Will still sitting at the card table, his eyes glued to Petty Officer Da Costa's padd.

"Did he make you give that to him?" asked Beverly.

"No, ma'am," said Da Costa gravely, missing her playful tone. "I offered."

"Don't mind her, Da Costa. She's just trying to take my gifts away," Will said. He pushed the padd aside and met Beverly's eyes, his brows raised. "Is that my cure-all?" he asked, nodding to the cup of water.

"It's your sleep aid," Beverly said. "Drink."

Will took the cup, his fingers brushing against hers. He raised his chin in a silent toast before he sipped. "All of it?" he asked, his voice echoing around the rim of the cup.

"All of it."

"Tyrant," Will muttered. Beverly glanced at Da Costa, wondering if he'd catch that this was a joke, and smiled a little when she found him rolling his eyes.

"Can you give us a moment alone, João?" Beverly asked.

Da Costa didn't need to be told twice. He strode out at a nice, leisurely pace, though, which Beverly appreciated — it made this whole affair

seem more casual. She pulled up a chair and watched Will down his glass of water, making exaggerated faces of disgust.

“It’s flavor-neutral, Will,” said Beverly.

“It’s the sap of hell,” Will responded. He drained the last dregs and shook his head in a barely-controlled shudder. “I must be the one-percent who can’t be neutralized.”

He was trying to draw her into a bit of banter, and Beverly very nearly fell for it. Instead, she slipped Da Costa’s padd beneath her own and lit up her screen. Will watched, eyes flickering, smile gone.

“You have to be in bed in ten minutes,” Beverly told him. “So I’ll be quick. How was your first day here?”

“Good,” said Will faintly.

Beverly marked down his answer, but raised one slender eyebrow. “The techs told me you had a few crying spells,” she said, working to keep her voice neutral. “Is that true?”

Will’s expression spasmed, but he gave a slight nod. His eyes followed her hands as she typed up this information.

“Why were you crying?” Beverly asked.

“Bev.” He said it so softly she almost thought she imagined it. She met his eyes, saw the quiet pleading there, all of it walled up behind a dozen barriers of First Officer Dignity.

“Will,” she responded evenly, forcing him to use his words.

“You’re not my therapist. Why do you need to know?”

Beverly chewed on her answer. A valid question, she decided. So she gave him an honest response. “Typically, when we have psych holds — which isn’t very often — I handle small matters of assessment, while Deanna carries the main brunt of the weight. She can’t be in sickbay all day, so she relies on my observations. And my observations stretch a lot further when I can speak to the patient and ask him questions.”

“But you don’t have to,” said Will, letting his gaze slide away.

“No.” Beverly searched his face. “I don’t have to.”

He nodded, a silent order to drop it. And Beverly knew what Jean-Luc had said to him this morning — had discussed it as trio, her and Jean-Luc and Deanna — so she knew perfectly well what started the day-long crying spell. She just wasn’t sure that Will did. For all his intelligence, he could be marvelously obtuse about these kinds of things ... and almost everyone, she’d found, was extra dense when it came to their own emotions rather than their friends’. She closed the assessment file and looked Will up and down.

“Do you want to talk about your options?” she asked.

“Please,” he said faintly, still staring at the wall. If he looked at her, Beverly realized, he would probably start crying again, and she couldn’t blame him for avoiding that. So long as he kept his gaze on the wall, he could maintain his poker face remarkably well.

“You can leave tomorrow,” Beverly said. “If you want to. You’ll have a new schedule set out by Jean-Luc. Shortened bridge shifts, planned activities, and two classes, plus your therapy sessions in the evening with Dr. Macnair.”

“Classes?” asked Will, almost — almost! — meeting her eyes in his puzzlement. “Teaching or taking?”

“Teaching,” said Beverly with half a smile. “You’ll be taking over two classes for the upperclassmen. Your rotation was almost up, anyway. Jean-Luc just sped up the process.”

“Which classes?” Will asked.

“Piloting and field diplomacy.”

Will nodded to himself. He didn’t look daunted by the prospect — of course, like all officers, he’d done his fair stint in the classroom before. “And the planned activities?”

“Your choice,” Beverly said. “But on-schedule, and supervised. You could spend time with your band — or visit the holodeck, with an escort. You’ll be monitored by Deanna to make sure you’re not suicidal. And you’ll have a night guard. Someone you’re comfortable with.”

A shadow crossed Will’s face. He folded his arms on the table and stared at the glassy surface, his reflection warped.

“If I stay?” he asked.

“If you stay,” said Beverly carefully, “you’ll rest, and you’ll be monitored full-time, not just during activities or at night. You will attend therapy, just like you would if released. And you will be allowed as many visitors as you like — but they will, of course, know that you’re in sickbay, and they might ask why.”

“You haven’t told them?” said Will, finally startled enough to meet her eyes. “All those people who came by today—”

“No, Will. Nobody knows but my med techs and your direct chain of command. Myself, Deanna, Jean-Luc.”

“Worf...?”

“I can’t say what Mr. Worf *believes*,” Beverly said. “I *can* say that he hasn’t been told anything except that you’re unwell.”

Will digested this. His cheeks hollowed out as he chewed them from the inside, and with a sigh, Beverly dug in her lab coat for her handheld re-generator. Will was so lost in thought he didn’t even notice what she was doing until she pointed it at his cheeks, one by one, and healed the tiny lacerations he’d dug into them with his cheeks.

“Sorry,” he said, a little bashful.

“Just try not to eat yourself up,” Beverly said. She checked her watch and sighed. “One minute, Will. You only have to make this decision one day at a time. Am I releasing you tomorrow morning? Or are you staying?”

Will hesitated. This was the nicest way Beverly could think of to ask if he was still suicidal. Did he need full-time monitoring, or could he get by with an occasional escort? Was he ready for the bridge, or did he still need help? She already knew the answer — or she was pretty certain — but she wanted to hear Will’s thoughts, too, and in the meantime, she offered him her arm and helped him to bed. The sedative had affected him more than he seemed to realize, for he stumbled a little as he stood.

In bed, Beverly took his vitals, letting the scanner hover over his neck and chest. Will stared at the ceiling. He blinked the static from his eyes, visibly woozy. Then, with a slow sigh, he covered his face, rubbed at his cheeks, relaxed a little deeper.

“What’s in this stuff, really?” he asked, his hands still covering his eyes.

“It’s a sleep aid,” Beverly repeated. “And a sedative, an anxiolytic, and a nightmare repellent.”

“So it really is a cure-all,” he said, his voice slightly slurred. “I’ll stay.”

His tone was so casual that Beverly almost missed it. She paused the scanner — vitals normal — and studied what she could see of Will’s face.

“Say again?”

“I’ll stay.”

Chapter 24

Her name was Mrs. Hill, and she was the first-ever creative writing teacher at Valdez's elementary school. She wasn't like Ms. Johanssen at all. Mrs. Hill was short, squat, and portly, with a cap of shiny black hair and a pug nose. She was older than Mrs. Shugak, too, and she smelled like something musty-sweet that Rosie said was burnt sugar.

Rosie hated Mrs. Hill.

Will *loved* her.

His very first assignment for her class — a third-grade class that he got bumped up into — was to write an essay on any topic he liked, and he chose music. Sometimes, when Kyle was in a good mood, he would take Will out in the aircar, through fields and forests and valleys where the snow was deep, and he'd play a music chip with old hoarse voices cracking and brass instruments blaring in the background.

Fishing. Music. Chess. Starships. These were things that Will and his father both liked. They couldn't talk about them, really, but sometimes Kyle would wake him up before dawn and gently push a cup of hot cocoa into his hands — and he'd let Will slowly blink the sleep away while he got their gear together for an early-morning fishing trip. Sometimes they could sit in the aircar together and drive for hours just to listen to that music chip in its entirety, never speaking. Sometimes on a cold night his father might call him into the kitchen where a game of tri-dimensional chess was set up, or the blueprints for a brand-new starship model were on display, and Kyle would pull Will into his lap and explain what every new design brought to the table.

So Will wrote about music. His writing wasn't the best, in and of itself. But he programmed the report to play a file of Louis Armstrong while Mrs. Hill read. Glitchy, and it had volume issues, and halfway through the report it froze and looped back around to the beginning, but Mrs. Hill was delighted.

"You know, the middle school has a band," she told him after class. "You could learn to play the trumpet, just like Louis Armstrong."

"My dad played the trumpet," said Will, which was neither a yes nor a no. "He was first-chair."

Mrs. Hill raised one shiny black eyebrow. "We could start you off on a recorder," she offered. When Will just stared at her, his face blank, she said, "Or a harmonica. Let me ... here."

She reached into one of her desk drawers where, to Will's shock, a whole library of pre-packaged plastic instruments was waiting. Mrs. Hill removed a little harmonica and handed it to him. There was a chip taped to it, beneath the biodegradable wrap.

"That chip will teach you how to play," she said.

Will's heart raced. He imagined playing this at home each night. The noise. Would Dad be pleased that Will was following in his footsteps, or would he be irritated with the constant wail of the harmonica? Impossible to tell. Will squeezed the harmonica tight in his hand and thought, by habit, *I could practice at Rosie's...*

But he couldn't go back to Rosie's. Ever. No one had told him he wasn't allowed, but he knew.

"Will?" said Mrs. Hill gently. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

He swallowed his pounding heartbeat and mustered up a dazzling smile. First rule of school: play cute. "I love it," he said sweetly. "Will you come to my first concert? I'll get you VIP tickets. And a backstage pass."

His voice came out a little breathy, like a gasp, but it seemed to work. Mrs. Hill's concern collapsed into a dry look of amusement.

"What else do you like, Will?" she asked.

And that was how she found out about the orcas.

Once, centuries ago, the orcas had almost gone extinct. Will knew this from reading his father's encyclopedias, and from his trip to the zoo. But a program in the 22nd Century had brought the population back from the brink, and now, if you climbed up high enough, you could see enormous pods of them breaking the waves off the coast of Valdez.

Orcas were highly intelligent. They knew tactics, and Will's dad loved tactics — it was what he did for Starfleet, and it was the source of one of his rare moments of praise for Will (when he caught him winning a game of war in the summer, with improvised hand grenades made out of mud). The males had dorsal fins that could grow as high as six feet tall (taller than Kyle Riker). They could live up to eighty years, and they had teeth, and they only allowed one half of their brains to sleep at a time, so they wouldn't forget how to breathe.

Will's second essay for Mrs. Hill's class was on orcas, and he got 60%. And that was even though Mrs. Hill missed two of his spelling mistakes ... but despite the low grade, she drew a little picture of an orca in the margin, and a speech bubble that said "GOOD WORK!" Will had to fight with himself, the urge to keep that drawing forever vs. the wiser urge to destroy all evidence that he'd scored poorly. The next essay was on Louis Armstrong (53%, and Will got a slight admonishment for making up facts, but the simple truth was he really thought Louis Armstrong played trumpet *and* went to the moon), and then, finally, the creative writing class graduated from essays to stories. Fiction.

These, Will was better at. He could make up whatever he wanted and still get 100%. He could be silly and make jokes and not get yelled at for it. All that really mattered were his spelling mistakes and his grammar.

"And you're not bad at grammar, Will," Mrs. Hill told him sternly one day after class. "You're seven years old in a class full of nine-year-olds."

They just have more practice than you.”

“But I’m supposed to be as good as them,” Will said.

Mrs. Hill gave him a quick, disapproving look. Then she turned back to her reports and continued grading as if she hadn’t heard him. “This is why parents don’t get a say in bumping children up a grade,” she muttered.

A cold flush washed over Will’s body. He remembered his meeting, ages ago, with Mr. Mercurief. The suggestion that he be put in an advanced program, that discussion of his test scores. Had it been his father’s idea all along? Had he forced the teachers to move Will up? Mrs. Hill glanced up at him and something in her harsh expression seemed to melt.

“Will,” she said softly. “I only meant…”

(Years later, when he looked back on this, Will couldn’t remember how or what she explained).

At the end of his second quarter, Mrs. Hill pulled out a box of toys. Some of them were puzzles. Some were building kits. Others were miniature coloring books with packs of markers attached. All the kids took a turn standing on tiptoe to peer inside, and when a boy named Garth requested it, Mrs. Hill even went through the contents one by one so they knew what was in store.

When she pulled out an orca statue, Will knew deep in his bones that she’d chosen it for him. No one else in class liked orcas. Not like he did. She’d filled this box with cheap little toys and trinkets as an end-of-quarter prize and she’d chosen something specifically for him. He’d be in agony if any of the other kids got to it first.

But:

“Let’s start with the youngest,” Mrs. Hill said. “Will, come up here. You can trade your green cards for a prize.”

Sweet victory. Last year he’d scraped through to the end of 2nd quarter with only five green cards to his name. This year, despite all his fidgeting and talking out of turn, he had twelve. He handed them over to Mrs. Hill, heart racing a mile a minute, and pulled the orca statue triumphantly from the box.

At home, it went on the shelf above his bed, between his models of the Enterprise and the Stargazer. He started sleeping with his pillow at the foot of the bed so he could stare at the orca as he dozed off. Images of adventures played in his head. He imagined the orca as a walking, talking janitor at his school — because the janitor, Cheryl, was very nice and she’d given him a chocolate bar once, so it seemed natural to put an orca in her place. And in his daydreams, that orca would see that Will was limping one day — or that he had a bruise — and he’d pull Will aside and check him over, and then…

And then reveal that he was part of Starfleet, naturally. Helmsman for the U.S.S. Stargazer. And he’d beam Will up as the newest cadet, let him fly the ship. Or maybe he was the chieftain of an underwater city full of orcas who could talk, like him, and he’d reveal that Will was part-orca, that his mother — well, Will’s mind skittered over the details there, but the point was that he could breathe underwater if he wanted to, and he didn’t mind the cold, and he could go to live in Orca City anytime he wanted.

This was the story he turned in to Mrs. Hill on a Tuesday in February. Puddles of melted snow covered the floor, and Will’s boots squeaked as a result, and he remembered dropping the report chip in the playground on his way in, and worrying that it would be too wet to work.

If it had been too wet to work, that would have been a blessing. He just didn’t know it at the time. He turned his chip in and he squeaked back to his desk, and he and Garth started a whispered conversation about who was going to kick whose ass when they played war at recess. Will’s ears were still freezing from the walk to school, his hair still damp from a snowball he took to the face. From Rosie, who’d pounced on his back and pinned him down and rubbed his face in the stinging snow — and he’d been grinning so wide his face hurt when he tackled her back, drove her to the ground — and then he’d remembered the dog kennel and he let her go.

Tuesday. February.

Mrs. Hill read the story Will had written about hidden bruises on his body and a kind school worker whisking him away. She glanced up from her desk, her face pinched, and looked right at him, and Will felt her gaze like a searing brand on his skin. He looked back at her, confused, still half-smiling from his conversation with Garth.

And of course, they had to call his dad.

“Your teacher tells me you want to run away.”

The aircar was stifflingly warm, with Will dressed in a sweater and his winter coat. He stared out the window at the snowy landscapes passing by and wished he were out there.

“No,” said Will quietly.

“No?”

He could feel Kyle’s eyes on him, but he refused to look over and meet his gaze.

“She read me an interesting story today,” Kyle said.

Will didn’t take the bait.

“Did you tell her you have bruises?” Kyle asked.

Will swallowed hard, his face burning. “No,” he said.

“No, of course you didn’t. Because you *don’t* have bruises.”

The soft jazz of the music chip ended abruptly when Kyle hit the off button. In the distance, Will could see the ocean growing closer. He really didn’t have any bruises right now. And he really didn’t tell the teacher that he had them. But...

“Do you have a bad life, Will?” asked Kyle lightly.

“No, sir,” said Will, his face so hot now that it was painful. He couldn’t allow himself to look outside at the ocean anymore. He stared down at his lap instead.

“I’d say you have a pretty good one,” Kyle continued. “Nice house. Beautiful village. You’ve got teachers who recognize your potential. A dad who takes you fishing every weekend. You’re in judo, baseball, Parrises Squares...”

Will swallowed hard.

“So why do you want to run away?” Kyle asked, still in that gentle tone.

“I don’t,” said Will, his voice small.

Kyle glanced over, studying Will hard. His gaze raked over Will’s face. Everywhere it touched, Will’s skin prickled and burned, like needles sinking into the flesh. He wasn’t overheated anymore. Now, as Kyle’s gaze drifted down Will’s body, he started to shiver, and his sweater and coat felt like distant water surrounding a rocky island, touching him, but not really part of him, not capable of lending him any real warmth.

“Where are we going?” Will asked, trying to force some normalcy into his voice.

Kyle was silent, eyes on the horizon now. Without the music playing, all Will could hear was the hum of the aircar’s engine and the occasional thump of snow beneath the hull.

“You like orcas,” Kyle said finally.

Will swallowed again, so hard it hurt his throat. He sat up a little higher in his seat and craned his neck to see the sea.

“I’m taking you to see an orca,” Kyle said. So reasonable.

Will saw it before they stopped the aircar. The hatch slid back overhead and the stench of decay seeped in. Fishy and cold-smelling, it pierced right through him, blasted his way by the high wind coming off the ocean. Every winter that wind carried the stench of dead fish into town, but this was something different: deeper and richer and more overwhelming, more total, than anything Will had experienced before.

Birds cried out overhead. Cold seaweed and wet sand clung to Will’s boots. By instinct, like a baby, he grabbed onto the hem of his father’s coat and held tight as they crossed the beach. Pale waves crashed against the shore and sent frothy water over their feet, but they walked on, until the hulking black carcass of an orca loomed ahead of them and blocked out the sun.

Its mouth hung open. Its teeth were stained yellow and pink. Seabirds picked at its tongue. White-ish blubber spilled to the beach in clumps, sloughing from the orca’s exposed bones. Green-brown guts curled inside its body, and when a seabird sank its beak into one, a foul reek not unlike a sewer filled the air, and Will covered his mouth and nose with a cry, like he’d been punched.

He watched the seagulls pluck out the orca’s last remaining eye. He listened to the wet suck and bite of feeding. He took shallow breaths to try and keep the stench out of his lungs. And finally, when he couldn’t bear it, he turned his head and buried his face in his father’s coat, clinging to him desperately, and Kyle ran his fingers through Will’s hair and let him hide.

“That’s what happens to orcas, Will,” said Kyle, his voice soft. “It doesn’t matter how big and strong you are. You can still wind up beached.”

Will squeezed his eyes shut and curled his fingers tight in Kyle’s coat.

“You still want to run away?” Kyle asked.

Just a meter away from them, there was a slick stretching noise as a seagull ripped a strip of flesh from the orca’s back. Will shook his head furiously.

“No,” he said, his voice broken.

“You’ll stay?” asked Kyle gently, his thumb stroking the shell of Will’s ear.

“I’ll stay,” Will said. “I’ll stay.”

And he kept his face hidden, his whole body trembling, the cold wind biting at his hands ... and listened to the seagulls feed.

That night, Kyle accompanied Will to the bathroom and bathed him like he was a little kid. He washed Will’s hair for him and dried it with a towel, careful not to hurt him, and he dressed him up in his pajamas and carried him to bed, and Will let it happen. His father tucked him in, with the pillow at the foot of the bed, the way Will liked it. So he could see his starships. His orca. With hooded eyes, Will stared at them, and barely noticed when his father kissed him goodnight, ruffled his hair, exited the room.

The door clicked shut. A shaft of moonlight hit the shelf over Will's bed. Some of the light glittered over the Enterprise's hull. Most of it, though, fell on the orca statue Mrs. Hill had given him. Will turned his head to the side, where a stuffed orca rested on his desk, the toy Mrs. Shugak and Mr. Shugak had bought him at the zoo last year. His throat tightened; his heartbeat was cold and slow.

In the morning, Will zipped them both into his backpack. He took a detour on his way to school, stopping by the little river where he liked to fish sometimes, on his own, without his father to join him. There he rested his backpack in the snow and pulled the orcas out, one soft, one smooth and hard, both utterly familiar to him.

One of them sank when he threw it in the river. The other bobbed to the surface and floated away.

He never saw either of them again.

Chapter 25

His face was aching, from the curve of his cheekbone down to his jaw. Nothing had happened to it. It wasn't a real ache. It was an itch just beneath the skin, an antsy desire for action, for the crack of knuckles against bone. If he didn't have an escort, he'd probably do something he hadn't done since he was an ensign aboard the Pegasus — lock himself in the head, turn on the fan so nobody could hear him, and strike himself in the cheek over and over again, harder and harder, until he emerged with a fresh bruise.

But Riker did have an escort, so he rested his fist against his cheek and dug his knuckles into the flesh more subtly, keeping his eyes on the viewscreen.

"How are you feeling today?" asked Dr. Macnair.

Riker's eyes flicked to the door. One of the med techs was stationed just outside, so he couldn't hear.

"I don't know," Riker said.

"Think about it."

Seconds ticked by. Beneath the table, Riker twisted his foot at the ankle, grinding his toes against the floor. He dug one knuckle deep into his cheek and let out a sigh.

"Thoughts?" asked Macnair.

"Nothing comes to mind."

He didn't like the amused glimmer in Macnair's eyes. "You're telling me there's nothing going on in that head, Will? You're just sitting here, envisioning a blank white wall?"

"Well, I am now."

Macnair smiled a little. Gently, he said, "Let's stop hurting ourselves."

Riker gave him a confused look.

"Put your hands on the table for me," said Macnair.

Slowly, Riker let his hands fall. In his reflection on the recorder, he could see the dull flush of color where he'd been digging into his own skin.

"Now tell me what you feel," Macnair said.

Riker turned his gaze inward. He examined the swirl of emotion inside him like it was so much smoke, each individual tendril indistinguishable from the next.

"Numb," he said finally, giving up.

"Do you really feel numb?" Macnair asked. "Or are you just saying that because it's easy?"

"I don't *know*," Riker said, a little short now. He took a steadying breath through his nose and squared his shoulders. "Restless. Bored. Horny."

Macnair's eyes didn't so much as flicker. "I'm not sure those qualify as emotions, Will."

"Don't they? You asked me how I feel. I'm trying to tell you."

"I do believe you're trying," said Macnair carefully — so careful that it pierced Riker right in the chest. Suddenly he couldn't meet Macnair's eyes through the screen. Slowly, Riker slipped his hands beneath the table, out of sight. They curled in his lap, his thumb rubbing painful circles on his index finger, twisting the skin until it ached. And the movement pushed the heel of his palm against his cock, a shiver of sensation almost impossible to resist.

"Have you had any visitors today?" Macnair asked, changing the subject.

"No," said Riker. He pressed the heel of his palm down a little harder, his cock filling out in response. "I think they're getting the message."

"What message is that?"

"That I don't want to see anyone just yet," said Riker, shifting in his seat. There was a light, familiar burning sensation in his urethra, the start of arousal, the desperate need for friction. He stopped rubbing at his index finger entirely and curled his fingers tight around his cock instead, through his pajama pants. "The first day, there were dozens of visitors," Riker said. "But I turned them all away, and they must have gotten the hint."

"Why *do* you turn them away?" Macnair asked.

"I just don't want to see anybody," said Riker, grinding the pad of his thumb against his foreskin for a pinching sensation that hit the spot just right. His cock rested, thick and heavy against his thigh, and he shifted his hips a little so he could run his index finger along the underside of

it. Teasing. Ticklish.

“You don’t want them to see you in sickbay?” Macnair asked.

“That’s part of it.”

“Or you don’t think you deserve visitors?” Macnair suggested.

Riker dragged his thumb over the very tip of his cock, pressing the fabric of his trousers down against the sensitive slit. A moment later, against his will, he bucked his hips a little — minutely — in an instinctive grasp at friction, pressure, his thumb pressing in so hard it hurt.

“This isn’t appropriate behavior, Will,” said Macnair mildly.

A cold flush washed over Riker’s body and he froze in his seat, still grasping his cock beneath the table.

“Why don’t we put our hands on the table for now,” Macnair suggested.

Like a scolded child, Riker obeyed. At first, there was no emotion attached to it — just a stunned numbness at being caught. Then mortification rushed in, turning his face hot and hunching his shoulders up to his ears.

“Everyone has needs,” said Macnair without a change in tone. “And you have very little privacy at the moment, I understand. I can speak to Dr. Crusher about arranging a private room—”

“Don’t,” said Riker softly, his voice broken. He stared at his hands, unable to look at Macnair through the viewscreen. “I won’t do it again.”

“Will, it’s alright to—”

It would get him in trouble later, but Riker’s hand shot out of its own volition and hit the transmission button, ending the call. The viewscreen collapsed into a fizzle of static and then went dark, cutting Macnair off mid-sentence. He’d be pissed, thought Riker dully, over the roar of his own heartbeat in his ears. But there was nothing for it. If he’d listened a moment longer, he would have ... he didn’t know, really. He would have fallen apart, and that would be even more mortifying and unexplainable than the urge that made him touch himself beneath the table, when Macnair was right there.

There was a pneumatic hiss as the door to 1-A slid open and the morning med tech stepped inside.

“Sir?” he said.

“Connection issues,” Riker said breathlessly. His chest rose and fell, quick and shallow. “I think our subspace comms are out.”

The med tech moved forward to check for himself, but Riker’s hand closed compulsively around the viewscreen, refusing to let it go. With his palm over the display, there was nothing the med tech could do to confirm or refute it. Helpless, the tech fell back and stationed himself inside the door.

“Shall I call Dr. Crusher?” he asked, eyeing Riker.

“No.”

“You’re breathing a bit too fast, sir. Try to slow it down.”

“I’m fine,” Riker said. His eyes were unfocused. He could hear the breath whistling in his lungs.

But he meant it.

He was fine.

Chapter 26

There was a portable Starfleet transceiver that Kyle Riker kept on him at all times, even fishing. He'd set it up on a tripod on the bank of a river and keep one ear perked for the sound of a beep. When this transceiver lit up, it always meant Kyle Riker was going away.

Will hated that transceiver. The very sight of it made his stomach flip and tighten into knots. But inevitably, when Kyle left, Mrs. Shugak came over and made the Riker house into her home, and after only an hour of her being there, the knots went away. The Riker home was warmer with Mrs. Shugak there. It smelled better — like fir trees and fresh baking. She would get the good blankets out of the guest closet and deposit them on Will's bed, so the house even seemed more comfortable, more soft, with Mrs. Shugak here.

Only...

"This is Dmitri," Mrs. Shugak said.

She had her gnarled hands on the shoulders of a boy the same height as Will, with dark eyes and a jutting chin.

"He's a little older than you," Mrs. Shugak said when they failed to speak to each other. "But I'm sure you two will get along just fine."

"I'm ten," said Dmitri to Will, his eyes hard.

"I'm seven," Will said. He shifted from foot to foot, unsure what to say. He knew Dmitri — vaguely — from school, because sometimes Will was with the third grade class for recess, and they always shared recess with the fourth-graders. Dmitri was part of a squad who always played basketball in the parking lot instead of 'baby games' like dodge-tag or war. He had long, straight black hair down to his shoulders that all the girls liked because it was badass — but Will was just a little bit taller, a lot faster, and the girls liked that too, even if he *was* only seven. They stared each other down, both of them secretly vying for the coveted title *Cooldest Boy in Class*.

And Mrs. Shugak had invited the enemy right into his home.

"Do you want to go fishing?" Will asked, trying to make the best of it.

"No fishing," said Mrs. Shugak at once. "The last thing I need is the two of you falling in the river while your dad is away."

"Aw, Mrs. Shugak!"

"Don't try to sweet-talk me, either," said Mrs. Shugak. She patted Dmitri on the shoulder and made her way to the kitchen. "What do you boys want for supper?"

"Can we have pizza?" asked Dmitri.

"No. Pizza is a special treat. I'm not going to use the replicator for supper"

Dmitri glanced sideways at Will. They bumped shoulders — deliberately, Will thought — and Dmitri's elbow almost caught him in the ribs. "She doesn't think you're special," Dmitri muttered.

Was that a joke? Will half-smiled by instinct, then let the grin fade. He wasn't sure. He hurried away from Dmitri and into the kitchen instead.

"I can help you cook," he offered. "We could make piroche again."

Mrs. Shugak glanced at him from the pantry. "Oh," she said. "Not tonight, Will. Why don't you play with Dmitri until supper's ready?"

Devastating. Will made a big show of dragging himself back to the living room, but Mrs. Shugak didn't laugh. Maybe she didn't see; maybe this was more serious than he thought. In the living room, he stood halfway behind the couch and fiddled with a souvenir statuette his dad had brought back from an alien planet, sneaking peeks at Dmitri from the corner of his eye.

"Do you want to play?" Will asked.

"No," said Dmitri at once.

"I have a building kit. We can—"

"Do you have video games?" asked Dmitri, studying the holoscreen.

"No. I'm not allowed."

"What's this, then?" Dmitri yanked an ocular visor from the cabinet and held it up to his eyes.

"That's for my flight simulations," Will said. A part of him hoped Dmitri would ask about that — give him a chance to talk about the flight academy — but Dmitri just wrinkled his nose and put the visor back. "How do you know Mrs. Shugak?" Will asked.

Dmitri gave him a weird look. "She's my aunt."

"Oh." Will watched as Dmitri scanned the music and video chips left behind by Kyle Riker. They were mostly adult-stuff — politics and debates, documentaries. Nothing fun. "Is she babysitting you, too?" Will asked.

"I guess." Dmitri gave a one-shouldered shrug. "I don't really need a babysitter. My mom lets me stay home alone all the time."

“My dad does too, sometimes,” Will offered — but this chance at friendship was shot down with a roll of Dmitri’s eyes.

“Your dad’s a snob,” he said firmly.

What that had to do with being left alone, Will had no idea. He put his hands on his hips and studied Dmitri a little harder, desperate to figure him out. He didn’t try to hide what he was doing, but Dmitri pretended not to notice. While Will watched, he tipped the video chips out of their slots one by one and let them fall to the floor.

“You’re a dick,” Will decided.

Dmitri, just for a second, lost that smug expression on his face and stared at Will, eyes wide. Then the smirk was back. “Did you learn that from the big kids?”

“You’re a cocksucker, too,” Will said, and the smirk dissolved into an outraged ‘o’. Triumph soared through Will even as he backed up, out of Dmitri’s reach. “I heard you sucked Jeremy Ulrich’s cock under the bleachers—”

“I did not!” Dmitri howled, truly scandalized, and a laugh bubbled over Will’s lips as he ran away, furniture crashing as Dmitri plowed after him.

“Cocksucker!” Will said, and Dmitri bit back,

“Fuck you, asshole!”

And he made a swipe for Will’s face, his hand closed into a fist, but he missed. The souvenir statuette bounced off the floor with a metal clang; stacks of books slid across the hardwood planks and got trapped beneath Dmitri’s feet. His fingers closed on Will’s collar just as Mrs. Shugak emerged from the kitchen.

“Boys,” she said, her voice like iron. “Who did I just hear cursing?”

They went still. Dmitri released Will’s collar at once; Will rubbed his throat where he’d been choked.

“It was him,” said Dmitri, pointing to Will.

Will, whose throat was too sore to tattle right away, just glared at Dmitri. No point in denying it now. He looked to Mrs. Shugak and gave her his best puppy-dog eyes, hoping the punishment would be gentle.

“I know it wasn’t Will,” said Mrs. Shugak impatiently. “Dmitri, what have I said about using that kind of language?”

The look Dmitri gave him might have melted iron ore, it was so fierce. Will swallowed hard, still massaging his throat.

“Mrs. Shugak—” he said, ready to rat himself out.

“Why do you *call* her that?” Dmitri burst out, shoving Will hard. “God, this is exactly why everyone says you’re a freak!”

“Dmitri!” Mrs. Shugak snapped.

“It’s her name!” said Will at the same time. And then, cheeks burning, “Nobody thinks I’m a freak! They say *you’re* a freak. They say your mom does drugs!”

“Will!”

This time, the hand that grabbed him by the collar was Mrs. Shugak’s. She wrenched Will and Dmitri apart and held them still.

“Neither of you are freaks,” said Mrs. Shugak with strained patience in her voice. “Dmitri, if Will wants to call me Mrs. Shugak, then he can call me Mrs. Shugak. Will...” And was it his imagination, or did her eyes seem significantly harder when she looked at him? “I never want to hear you spreading gossip like that again. That was a *mean* thing to say. It’s what a *bully* would say ... and it’s beneath you.”

Will stared at her, his eyes wide and his face hot, and she released him. Beside him, Dmitri was staring at the floor, his face working — anger and tears fighting for dominance. Why was he crying? He’d barely been scolded at all, and he was *ten*. Staring at him, Will’s blush faded, and left behind was a cool, almost paternal pity for Dmitri. His own shame washed away in the face of it.

“I’m sorry,” he said to Mrs. Shugak, calm and unintimidated.

Something in her expression changed. She stared down at him for a long time, silent and unreadable. Then she reached out and touched Dmitri lightly, just a quick brush of her fingers through his hair, and back to the kitchen she went. In the resulting emptiness, Will crouched down and shuffled the fallen books into a neat pile. His heartbeat was slow and steady.

He felt nothing, and he cleaned the living room up while Dmitri cried.

Normally, Will would sleep in his own bedroom while Mrs. Shugak slept in the guest room. But since today was a special occasion, Mrs. Shugak got the sleeping bags out and spread them on the living room floor.

“You boys can stay up a little late tonight,” she said. “But I want the holoscreen off by midnight, okay?”

“Okay,” said Will. He was already nestled in his sleeping bag; it smelled faintly of campfires and the river, of cooked fish. Beside him, Dmitri lay with his arms folded behind his head and an imperious glare on his face ... but there were still tear tracks on his cheeks, even though

dinner had come and gone and it had been hours since their fight.

“Will, where’s your orca?” asked Mrs. Shugak.

Will turned his gaze toward the holoscreen and pretended not to hear. He could see her out of the corner of his eye — studying him, waiting for a response. Eventually she would decide he was just embarrassed, that he didn’t want Dmitri to know he slept with a stuffed animal. And he knew Mrs. Shugak wouldn’t say anything. It all harkened back to that comment about Dmitri’s mother — drugs — being a bully.

Well, the same rules applied. Eventually, Mrs. Shugak shrugged the question away and bent down to give them each a kiss — Will’s forehead, Dmitri’s cheek. Both of them screwed their faces up and groaned.

“Sure, pretend to hate me,” said Mrs. Shugak, rolling her eyes. “How about I wake you up in the morning banging the pots and pans together?”

“One more kiss!” said Will, immediately repenting. He made grabby hands until she leaned down and kissed him again, this time with a laugh. Dmitri begrudgingly accepted a second kiss as well.

...And then they were alone together, with the quiet noise of the holoscreen lulling them to sleep. By the time Mrs. Shugak started to snore in the other room, children’s cartoons had given way to adult sitcoms and racy music videos, as Will had secretly known they would. He sneaked a glance at Dmitri and found him watching the holoscreen with hooded eyes. The light played over Dmitri’s face in flashing colors, making his tired eyes sparkle. Naked women reflected off the dark pupils — and his lashes were long — and in the darkness, with his hair splayed out on the pillow and his cheeks still streaked with tears, he looked almost pretty.

Heart racing, Will looked away. He focused on the holoscreen again. The music videos always excited him. The music itself wasn’t really to his taste — he couldn’t understand half the words — but the women lounged around in underwear, or nothing at all, and the men went shirtless, and sometimes their bodies pressed together onscreen, muscles shifting, skin shiny with oil, all of it set to a pounding beat. Beneath the blankets, Will shifted his hips, feeling vaguely like he needed to pee. He sneaked a hand between his legs and cupped himself, squeezing tight.

It felt good. Comforting. He could watch these music videos for hours, slowly falling sleep, with his hand between his legs and his thumb rubbing at the tip. He slid his hand beneath the waistband of his pajama pants and placed his palm flat against his underwear, enjoying the gentle swell of his body, the almost-itch inside him as he touched himself.

His eyes slid closed. Light flashed over his eyelids as one music video transitioned into the next. With a quiet sigh, Will moved his hand, just a little, rubbing down his length...

“What are you doing?” Dmitri blurted, jolting out of bed.

Will flinched, his eyes flying open. His hand froze in place.

“Are you—?” Dmitri’s gaze fixed between Will’s legs. His mouth fell open, eyebrows shooting up. “Auntie Tasiya!” he roared.

“No—” Will said in a whisper, trying to sit up. His limbs tangled in the sleeping bag, and he’d barely managed to unknot himself when Dmitri bounded out of bed and ran to Mrs. Shugak’s bedroom on bare feet.

“Auntie Tasiya!” Dmitri cried, banging on her door.

“Dmitri, don’t!” Will hissed, racing to catch up. He kept one hand between his legs, praying that the telltale hardness there would go away ... but he could hear Mrs. Shugak jumping out of bed and stumbling toward the door, her voice raised and anxious.

“Dmitri? Will? What’s going on—”

And then the bedroom door opened, and Dmitri told on Will in a heartbeat, and the evidence was right there between his legs for everyone to see. Undeniable.

For the first time, Will’s ears stopped working; whatever Mrs. Shugak said to him, whatever scolding he received, he didn’t hear it. For the first time, his mind drifted away; when he woke in his own bed, chest aching, he couldn’t remember how he got there, or whether he’d been spanked.

For the first time, he thought about throwing his orcas in the river and wished he’d climbed into the water and put his head beneath the surface and stayed there, too.

Chapter 27

You couldn't stop time forever.

Will Riker had been in sickbay for two weeks, nursed through each meal by Guinan and accompanied to the head by med techs. He was assessed daily for nausea and given a hypospray to help him sleep and stabilize his mood. Deanna was in touch with his mind periodically to make sure he wasn't close to offing himself; Dr. Macnair checked in once a day for a session of talk therapy that left Will feeling like an open sore. The ugly kind, pulsing red and oozing pus.

Worse, his list of visitors was getting longer, and Will couldn't stave them off forever. Geordi had dropped by for a game of chess, insisting he had to learn some basic strategies from Riker before he embarrassed himself at the engineering section's quarterly tournament.

"You didn't have to enter," Riker said, guarding the door to his private room.

"Data twisted my arm," Geordi claimed. "C'mon, Commander."

"Ask Deanna. She's a better player than me. She's beaten Data, too." Riker paused. His arm ached from barring the door; his back twinged from angling his body just-so to hide that he was wearing hospital pajamas.

"Counselor Troi is—" Geordi floundered for an excuse. "—busy."

This quick-witted justification was not enough to get Geordi into the room. And the next day Riker had to contend with Lieutenant Trujillo, who played the saxophone in Riker's band and insisted on turning all of sickbay into a practice suite if need be.

At least Riker could count on Beverly to chase the band away. They'd only gotten out fifteen seconds of music before Beverly drove them from sickbay. Fifteen seconds of brass and strings, barely a sampling taste of rhythm, all while Riker hid on the other side of the door — sitting down so they couldn't see him through the window, back pressed to the cool pneumatic wall. When his band left, there was silence: thick, milky silence that slowed the rush of blood in his veins and replaced the heartbeat in his ears with something empty, echoing. A vacuum.

Riker hid his face against his bent knees. He pressed his palms over his ears — pressure, popping, suction, like he could extract the silence and pour it out on the sickbay floor. He pressed harder, until his skull ached between his hands.

And then someone touched his knee.

"Sir?"

Texar. Riker shifted his palms and raked his fingers through his hair. "Yes?"

Texar crouched before him. His wide, watery eyes were scanning Riker's face. "Do you need a sedative?"

Whatever Riker had been feeling, it washed away at once. He let his legs slide out, careful not to kick Texar in the process, and huffed a sigh.

"I think I reached the inflection point," he said wearily.

"Sir?"

"The curve in the road. The point where staying here doesn't help anymore."

It took a minute, but eventually Texar's polite confusion broke and he realized what Riker was saying. Still, he was careful enough not to go running for Dr. Crusher. He pressed his communicator instead.

And so, with Riker worn out and empty on the sickbay floor, time started moving again.

His schedule was designed to give him "structure."

His shifts on the bridge would last only four hours apiece. He would help Guinan in the kitchen for dinner to ensure he kept eating — at least one meal per day, though his stomach roiled at the thought. He had two classes to teach; there were theories that his time spent in the classroom, around the Enterprise's kids, would rejuvenate him a bit, give him time to relax, and fill his time. Not to mention every Starfleet officer needed a refresher course now and then, and there was no better refresher than teaching.

The rest of his time was blocked out clearly. Band practice here. Holodeck time here, with escorts assigned to ensure he didn't hurt himself. He would be permitted to assist any of his crewmates with their hobbies, and his schedule was helpfully filled in with specific offers that looked almost like elective courses at the Academy. "Rhythm and Meter with Data." "Fun with Antimatter (Geordi)." "Basics of Klingon Music with Worf."

Music. Band. It would give him something to do but at the same time it put a knot in his stomach he couldn't manage to untie. The jazz band was made up of non-bridge officers and enlisted men. They didn't know where Riker had been or why; they weren't entitled to that information. So the whole time they practiced together, everyone would be glancing sideways at him, trying to work up the courage to ask.

Riker studied the schedule with one finger pressed to his temple, trying to relieve the headache there.

Therapy was blocked out for the evening, where it wouldn't interfere with his ability to work. And at night, there was a rotating roster of officers assigned to essentially join him in a sleepover, mainly Worf and Troi. Were these the two people Picard thought he would be most

comfortable with? Or were they the only two who signed up? He rather thought Geordi—

Riker's stomach twisted. Slowly, he curled his hand into a fist and let the headache blind him. No, he thought, remembering the night of his suicide attempt. Maybe not Geordi.

He was still sitting there, his thoughts a dark swirl, when the door hissed open and Picard stepped inside. He had a natural talent for owning any room he entered, always making Riker feel like an intruder — or a guest — in someone else's home. He shifted in his seat and looked up at Picard, eyebrows raised.

"Number One," said Picard easily. "I thought you might join me in the holosuite."

There should have been a flare of interest, or at least curiosity. But Riker's emotions stayed stagnant: a pool of standing water somewhere in his diaphragm, the buzz of insects humming in his ears.

"Now?" he asked, voice dull.

"If you're amenable," said Picard. He stood sideways in the door, letting his body block the motion sensor, and extended his hand in invitation. Or as an order. Sometimes, Picard was so glacially polite, it was hard to tell.

They took to the halls. They didn't speak. Before, these silences had been comfortable. There was no *need* to talk. But now...

Now Riker wasn't just the first officer. Now he was the son of a man who raped a child. Now he was the troubled crewman who spent two weeks in sickbay being escorted to the head. The guy who tried to kill himself in the holodeck; who might just try again. If Riker had to guess, he'd say there were orders written up on Picard's padd right now, grounding him to the nearest station for evaluation by psych-probe. That would be the responsible thing to do. It's what Starfleet used to do, when Riker was a child; he remembered hearing the stories from Kyle.

But no matter how long he studied Picard from the corner of his eye, Riker couldn't read his face.

They entered the holodeck together, momentarily disoriented by the glowing grid that chopped the floor and walls into neat squares. Picard barely tapped his palm against the computer — whichever program he had in mind, it was already primed to go. Around Riker, the eye-searing yellow grid pulsed and fizzled.

In its place, there was a lounge. Plush red chairs. High, arching walls creating a chamber overhead. Picard went straight for one of the chairs and laid himself down in it, half-reclined on the lounge, his eyes closed. But Riker stayed standing. On the far side of the room there was a stage, with old-fashioned Earth-style instruments at the ready.

"What is this?" Riker asked in a whisper.

"It's a private concert, Number One," said Picard without opening his eyes.

"What kind of music?"

"Baroque."

Riker swallowed hard. He rubbed his thumb against his index finger hard enough to irritate the skin. With a quiet shuffle, musicians filled the stage and readied their instruments, scarcely seeming to see their audience. Bows dipped gently against strings. Brass sliders glided into place.

And Riker sank into the chair at Picard's side, hardly daring to relax.

And the music — music without expectations, music without questions, without people — finally began.

Chapter 28

They came in all shapes and sizes.

On an away mission once, Riker killed a massive feline predator called a cartiga with his bare hands. But he wouldn't call that cat a monster. The aliens who hunted it, who drugged and taunted it, didn't qualify as monsters either, because they were just children, really, tossed into a dangerous arena unprepared. Set up by their own parents to die.

With his eyes closed and the baroque music swelling all around him, Riker became a different person. A different time. His eyes were glued shut by dried blood from a head injury; his pants were wet and sticky, his flesh consumed by that numb itch that stole over him from time to time, unpredictable. He couldn't drag his brain out of the past, couldn't force himself to focus on the music or the musicians, all those strangers in this room with him. Couldn't listen to their gaits, try to assess. They could grab him by hair, force his head back and his lips open, and he couldn't fight them back.

Beside him, Picard breathed deep and slow, so calm that if Riker just opened his eyes he knew he would calm down, too. Absorb Picard's serenity like it was his own. But his eyes stayed shut. When he tried to mimic Picard's breathing, his lungs flinched; he could only gasp.

And the air turned sour and metallic, like breathing in a mouthful of gas.

And the monsters in his mind overtook him.

Crack.

His skull slammed against the dojo mat, unprotected by a helmet. Whenever he hit his head, and he hit his head often, there was always a wave of nausea and a thick feeling in his brain, like someone had settled a cotton sheet over the coils and left it there to gum up the works. Gravity spun around him in a circle, until finally he realized where he was: stomach-up on the dojo floor, staring at the ceiling. Will shook his head to clear it — which never actually worked for him, but he always tried it anyway — and flexed his abs to sit up.

He meant to jump to his feet, weapon at the ready. He meant to slide right into an offensive position and put his father on the back foot. He would keep his elbow tucked and his shoulders loose, and he would slide his feet into a feint, and everything would turn out fine.

But his body didn't obey him.

His abs flexed. The muscles in his neck strained. But his body didn't move at all.

"Up," Kyle Riker commanded, pointing his anbo-jytsu truncheon at the floor. The end of it sparked and hummed, threatening to burn if it touched bare skin. Will had plenty of little burn marks littering his skin from that thing, could almost taste the sulphur in his mouth every time he heard it crackle.

"Get up," said Kyle with a touch of impatience. "I haven't got all day."

"I..." Will's voice came out slurred. "I can't."

The look his father gave him was a special one, reserved for baseball game injuries and less-than-stellar grades. It was a look of deep contempt. Next he would say "I didn't raise a quitter—" and Will was sick of hearing it, so he raised his head as much as he could while his body lay useless on the dojo floor.

"I can't move my legs," he said, a foreign calmness washing over him.

Kyle's eyebrows furrowed. Not concerned, just quizzical. Will tried again — tried *hard* — to kick his feet or jump off the dojo mat, but nothing moved. Even his hands felt strange and heavy, his wrists numb. He could bend his elbows, but his fingers hung useless and limp. With a groan of pain, Will let his head fall back.

"I didn't toss you that hard," said Kyle, sounding ludicrously like one of Will's classmates when they got in trouble on the playground.

It was a C5 spinal cord injury. Will knew from his prep classes for the Academy. They'd had him in paramedic training for a year now. He stared up at the ceiling with bleary eyes, his skin suddenly slick with sweat.

"Hospital," he said, too groggy to make it a full sentence.

With a sigh, Kyle set his truncheon down. He stood over Will, studying the way his body lay, and nudged one of Will's legs with his foot. Finally, disgusted, he shook his head.

"Hospital," said Will again. If they left this injury for too long, it would never heal right. He needed to hit the hospital in Fairbanks within six hours, or he'd be standing crooked for the rest of his life. "Dad..."

Kyle covered his face with his hands. He raked his fingers through his hair, exasperated. Overwhelmed. His eyes flickered from one corner of the dojo to the next, as if he half-expected to see a fully-stocked medcenter tucked away behind the tile walls.

"Dad," said Will pleadingly.

"I'll see what I can do," said Kyle, voice clipped. He turned to leave and a spark of alarm lanced through Will's chest. "This was a solo accident, alright?" said Kyle, pointing back at Will without turning around. "You were practicing on your own and you fell. Understood?"

“Dad!”

“I’m going to find an aircar,” Kyle said, and he was out the door without a backward look. Shallow, panicked breaths filled the silence. Will knew they were his own, but he couldn’t believe it. Not really.

A dream, he decided. Had to be a bad dream. Because he was smart, he was athletic, he didn’t get into stupid accidents like this. He was Will Riker. He’d been taking high school math since he was in first grade. He was the only kid in all of Valdez to get his own Academy prep program, the youngest-ever pilot to take a solo flight at the flight school.

He was going to be a Starfleet officer someday. The Stargazer. That would be his ship. This unresponsive lump of flesh on the dojo floor? That wasn’t him.

It wasn’t him.

There was no heat in the dojo. When the lights turned off automatically, Will was alone, his breath a frigid cloud of fog forming over his lips.

Junior Mance. His clever fingers racing over the piano keys. Will closed his eyes and imagined it so vividly he could hear the music in his ears, faint and tinny. Kyle would come back for him; he just had to distract himself, make the minutes tick by faster. Music would help him.

Creole Love Call. Blue Monk. Swingmation and That Mellow Feeling and Harlem Lullaby. Will’s breathing was still too fast, too shallow, but overlaid atop his quiet breaths there was the electrifying clarity of Mance’s piano. Gene Ammons on the saxophone. Cannonball Adderley on alto sax and Dizzy Gillespie on trumpet and the high natural contralto of Jimmy Scott keening over the brass.

It all came crashing down around him when naturally, like any budding musician, he tried to tap his toes.

His body wouldn’t obey him. The music warbled and warped. Thirst settled into his throat like a wad of barbed wire and there was nothing he could do to dislodge it. It was only an hour, maybe less, before he smelled urine and realized he couldn’t control himself, couldn’t even feel that his pants were wet. His chest ached and his breathing stuttered, and by the time night fell, Will gave up. He didn’t try to hold back the tears. He sobbed helplessly, like a child — nearly twelve years old, taller than his father, and crying like a baby. And he couldn’t even control his hands well enough to wipe the tears away.

He listened hard, desperate for another hint of it, but the music was gone.

In the early morning, before the sun was up, the dojo door creaked open and Will’s father stepped inside. There was no soundtrack playing in Will’s head. The cold floor of the dojo had leached all rhythm away; the snow banks outside dampened every sound. Just the tap of his dad’s shoes on the dojo floor, slow and cautious, like he half-expected Will to be dead.

“You okay, kiddo?” he asked, voice low.

Rescue. The hum of an aircar engine outside. The sight of an emergency regenerator in his dad’s hand. Dimly, like the chime of a distant bell, the music started up again — a little muffled, a little too connected to the pounding of Will’s heart, but there.

Kyle wrinkled his nose at the smell as he approached, but he didn’t say anything — and Will was so overwhelmingly grateful for that, so desperately glad to be rescued, that he forgot all his anger at being left here. The regenerator buzzed over his skin in a blue light, not healing him, but preventing further injury. He wrapped his arms around his father’s neck and leaned into his touch, and with uncharacteristic gentleness, Kyle laid him out on a cleaner patch of the floor. He stripped Will’s soiled clothes away and manipulated the unfeeling legs, bending them at the knee. His hands passed almost clinically over Will’s genitals with a warm rag. Quiet, ragged sobs filled the room — barely audible — as Kyle wiped away the rank stench of fecal matter without judgment or disgust.

Only a father would do that, Will thought. Humiliation and gratitude washed over him, so strong that all he could do was close his eyes and try to keep breathing. He could see Kyle’s hands lingering between his legs, but he couldn’t feel it, couldn’t sense the fingers sliding inside him, stretching him open. And he was grateful for that too.

Kyle checked Will’s face for any reaction. One hand was curled over Will’s penis. With the other, he’d inserted his index and middle fingers into Will’s body, pliant and relaxed. Whatever expression he saw on Will’s face, it seemed to disappoint Kyle. He stopped touching him entirely; for a moment he just stood there, pale and closed-off, staring at the dark stain on the dojo mat where Will had lain all night waiting for rescue.

Silently, Kyle moved away and washed his hands. He bundled Will up in a blanket, every inch of bare skin hidden. He cradled his son in his arms — clean now, no longer crying, but red-faced and exhausted and in pain. Kyle’s lips brushed against Will’s scalp. Then he kissed Will’s cheek ... then his lips, gentle and chaste.

“You’re alright,” Kyle murmured. “There’s an aircar waiting. You’ll be alright.”

So Will rested his head against his father’s chest, tears drying on his cheek and making his skin prickle. The music built to a crescendo, so triumphant now that it was deafening, intoxicating, impossible to look at it directly. And for the rest of his life, if he could help it, he would never think about the six hours he spent lying in his own waste on the dojo floor, or the illegal move that cracked his spine in the first place.

Never again.

When the holodeck program ended, Picard sat up, a little dazed, and waited for Riker to come back. His eyes were closed, his face pale and tight. His muscles were tense, not relaxed.

But minutes dragged by into a full hour, and a cold sweat broke out on Riker's forehead, and finally, with a quiet gasp, he let the tension fade. His eyes, when he finally opened them, were glassy but aware. He looked as though he'd run a marathon, and he didn't glance at Picard or ask him when the music stopped. He just threw his legs over the side of the bed and curled over them like he might vomit.

"Fuck," he breathed. "Jean-Luc—"

Picard was there, one hand on Riker's shoulder, the other wrapping tight around his fingers.

"Jean-Luc—" he tried again.

The program was over. The music was done.

They stayed.

Chapter 29

He wasn't suicidal.

In class, he slipped up, sleepwalking through the lessons. The Battle of Axar II became the Battle of Axar IV and remained that way through most of class, until a nervous-looking tween raised his hand and politely corrected Riker.

"Of course," said Riker, and the way he nodded his head, with his skull so heavy and his brain pulsing with a piercing headache, made him feel less like he was agreeing with the kid and more like he was falling asleep on his feet. "Of course. Thank you for the correction."

And he almost called the kid 'Wes', and he was halfway through the 'W' noise when he realized he didn't actually know this student's name.

But he wasn't suicidal. And the piloting class was better. They spent an hour in the flight simulator — safe, not dangerous, but with that artificial adrenaline rush built into it, the thrill of battle, of the chase. This class was with older students — Starfleet hopefuls with an interest in working the helm. So Riker was permitted, even encouraged, to set the simulation for a battle, to take on the role of an enemy hostile and chase his students halfway to hell and back.

He'd taught piloting classes. He knew too well how he reacted when a student shot him out of the sky. In the past, he'd tossed his helmet off with an exasperated, "Ah, damn it!" and an exhilarated laugh, one right after the other. He could remember chasing the lucky student down, analyzing their strengths, encouraging them to keep going, to hone their skills. But he never liked being shot down. Nobody would. There was always a twinge of disappointment to be out of the game.

Except today, when Riker's ship exploded, he sat back in his seat and left his helmet on. His hands loosened on the steering stick. He stared into the simulation's blackness, all the stars snuffed out by death. The noise of battle ceased. There was no sound at all, no chatter from the other pods, no hum of engines, nothing. Even his own breathing was muffled, slow. Easy to ignore.

Peaceful, he realized. Blind and deaf and mute, his tongue like iron in his mouth. And what would it be like, then, to slowly go insensate too, to lose his limbs one by one, to feel the cold thick numbness chasing down his blood vessels and winking out the synaptic charges in his brain?

"Johnny, get your gun," Riker muttered to himself, and one of his students knocked on the pod door and said,

"What, sir?"

Not so mute after all. But not suicidal either, Riker reminded himself. He unstrapped his harness and climbed out into the open air, and only then did he feel the cold sweat dripping from his hair. He shot his students a bright smile.

All teeth, no eyes.

His shift on the bridge — his first shift since returning from sickbay — was nerve-wracking. He tried not to let it show. Still, his left shoulder hitched up the same way it had ever since he was a little kid, a tell that no one missed. He nodded to Worf; he greeted Data, his voice a booming, friendly baritone, and tried not to look too relieved to hear himself speak.

Nobody asked questions. Nobody inquired after his health.

Everyone wanted to.

He could tell. When he sat in the first officer's chair and crossed his legs, he could see Jean-Luc watching him out of the corner of his eye. When he paced the bridge a short time later, he could feel Deanna's mind stretching out toward his, checking if he was okay. Worf scanned him up and down. The lieutenant at the helm opened her mouth, then closed it, like she'd suppressed the urge to ask how he was doing, where he'd been.

But they knew, Riker told himself, not sure if that was a comfort or ... or something neutral. He rubbed his thumb against his index finger and fixed his eyes to the viewport. They had to know. Nobody went missing for two weeks without at least a vague status report, like 'Commander Riker was injured on a mission' or 'Commander Riker is on leave.' And no message like that had been released — he'd checked his padd for one first thing upon being released. As far as anyone on the Enterprise knew, Commander Riker had simply disappeared, and no one would say why.

And they weren't stupid. They knew what a sudden disappearance meant.

Breathe, Imzadi, Deanna said, and Riker's left shoulder twitched, and he pushed her straight out of his head. Blank-faced, he circled back to his seat and checked the time. Twenty minutes had passed. He still had more than three hours to go.

And Worf's eyes were burning into the back of his skull.

And Picard was studying him like a specimen in a lab.

And Data kept furrowing his eyebrows and glancing Riker's way.

And all of them were wondering how fragile he was, how close to breaking.

And:

I'm not suicidal, Riker wanted to say, but he couldn't think of a way to play it off as a joke.

He'd loved Junior Mance when he was a kid. He had the kind of music taste that always impressed his teachers and left his classmates baffled. You didn't meet too many kids who rattled off a list of centuries-dead musicians as their favorites ... but the truth was, the first time he listened to jazz, Riker didn't like it all that much.

Of course he'd only been a toddler at the time.

He remembered, fuzzily, how it felt to sit nestled against his mother's side. The low warble of a trombone, the delicate tinkling of a piano. The cold air stinging his round cheeks and ruffling baby-thin hair. The green glow of lights in the night sky. Had she carried him all the way out to the mountains to see the northern lights? He couldn't trust a memory that old, and he couldn't exactly ask Kyle to confirm. But he remembered hating the thick winter clothes she'd wrapped him in — and wishing he was in bed where it was warm — and fussing over how the winter chill burnt his cheeks — and feeling like that music she was playing, from the chip-player attached to her belt, was the most grating wail he'd ever heard.

She'd brought him to see the northern lights and he'd thrown a tantrum over it. He remembered that, whether it was real or not. But then, years later, when she was gone and Will was a little older, when his dad put that jazz chip in the aircar player ... suddenly that same music sounded like heaven. Suddenly it curled around the coils in his brain like something warm and golden. Like the purest light he'd ever seen. Aurora borealis times a billion.

Will Riker was not suicidal, but after his stint in the holodeck with Picard, he rather thought he'd prefer to never listen to jazz again. Whether that meant quitting the band or destroying his music files or shoving propulsion drivers into his ears, he didn't care. That pierce of metal against his ear drums would feel like a cold drink of water after a long day. A spike of pain. Blessed silence.

Silence.

"Will—" said Picard, and Riker realized he was covering his ears as they left the holodeck. He let his hands fall, heart pounding too fast for him to feel embarrassed. "Will, wait a moment."

He sensed Picard reaching for him and wheeled away. He made it six steps down the hallway before a hand closed around his forearm hard enough to bruise.

"I don't think so, Commander," said Picard, his voice like steel. "Where are you going?"

"My quarters," said Riker. It came out steady, calm. How did he do that? It wasn't a conscious act, but it amazed him. He turned to face Picard now, confident his face was under tight control. "Don't touch me," he said, and satisfaction curled in his chest when Picard's face flushed an ugly red and he let go.

"I will accompany you," Picard said, never losing the trace of command in his voice.

"Fine." Riker turned on his heel. It would be childish to set his usual pace; he knew he usually took to the halls at a fast clip, too fast for many crewmen to keep up without jogging. Some vindictive creature in his chest urged him to do that now, to force Picard to run after him. But he locked the creature away and kept his pace slow.

When they turned down an empty hallway, Riker spoke, his voice measured.

"Will you stay the night with me, then?" he asked, keeping his tone neutral.

Picard gave him a sharp look. "Is that necessary?"

"Not at all," said Riker firmly.

"Will, what happened back there? In the holodeck—"

His communicator chirped and he let out a short, furious sigh, practically blowing steam out his nose. Picard slapped the communicator hard enough that it had to hurt him. "Picard here," he said shortly.

"Captain—" And Deanna's voice sent a cold flush through Riker's body and drained all his careful dignity away. He turned away so Picard couldn't see his face. "—I sensed — is Will okay?"

"He's fine, Counselor," said Picard, eyeing Riker. "We're just finishing up a holodeck program. Would you like to see him?"

"Would I like to see her?" asked Riker, letting his exasperation carry. There was silence from the communicator, and he had to shut himself off from Deanna's emotions viciously, the moment he felt the first bubbling hint of hurt.

His communicator beeped next. Deanna's voice emanated from his chest, speaking to him directly. "Will," she started.

He plucked the communicator from his uniform and jammed his thumb against the sensor, muffling her voice. "I'll be in my quarters," he said, voice rough.

He heard — couldn't help but hear — Picard calling for Worf. For an escort. Not that one was needed. Riker stalked to his quarters, his heartbeat pounding in his ears, and all of it — his pulse, the static of his breathing, his footsteps on the floor — sounded eerily similar to the beat and rhythm of a Junior Mance song. His lower back twinged, an electric spark of remembered pain, just as he reached his quarters and stepped inside.

Worf was already there.

“How the hell—” Riker started, throwing up his hands.

“I was in the area,” said Worf gravely. “Captain Picard informed me my services would be needed earlier than anticipated.”

Fuck it. “I’m taking a shower,” Riker said, spinning on his heel. Worf let him go. And why not? Only once he got into the head, Riker didn’t know what to do. He paced in a tight circle and darted one hand under the sink, activating a gush of water from the faucet.

“Hotter,” he said in an undertone.

The temperature increased, warm enough to turn his skin red. He hit the soap dispenser, not sure why he did it, and worked a liquid lather into his palms, dug his fingernails into the lines and creases that criss-crossed his skin. In the hospital, after his spinal injury, they’d given him some sort of painkiller that made him think his pores were widening — dark black holes opening up in his skin. The worst was his palms. There he’d seen the lines stretching apart, pure blackness underneath. And he’d become convinced that those black spots, those lines of shadow, were bugs or worms, nestled deep beneath the skin. Crawling out.

He dug at his skin a little harder, studied the pores closely. For just a moment, the soap smelled like disinfectant, like the stale sweat and soft rubber mats on the dojo floor.

“Hotter,” he told the computer, not bothering to whisper now, and he’d barely finished the word when the bathroom door hissed open and Worf filled the doorway, his face set in a scowl. “I’m fine,” said Riker, flicking the water off his hands.

“You are not showering,” Worf said.

“I was getting around to it. Jeez, Worf, don’t you knock? What if I was—” Riker started to curl his fingers in an obscene gesture, then stopped, the humor dying somewhere in his chest. He let his hand fall to his side, still a little soapy. The mirror reflected his own face back at him: too thin, with bruises underneath the eyes. Gradually the sound of Worf’s voice faded out. The music was back. When Sunny Gets Blue, slow and teasing, the piano just a little too clever, too wry at the start. Then that quick play of the low keys, and suddenly the sadness, the regrets, sank in soul-deep.

Riker’s eyes unfocused. Before him there was an eleven-year-old boy, his face pale and his hair damp with sweat, pupils blown wide from painkillers. Learning how to walk again. Visiting the hospital bathroom and staring at himself for the first time since his dad left him on the dojo floor.

Then the mirror shattered and the music stopped, and glass shards fell to the floor in an almost lyrical tinkle. Riker took a sharp breath and stepped away.

“What—” he said, looking down at his hands, but it wasn’t him who broke the mirror. No blood on his knuckles. No lingering pain. Once again, it had been Worf who made the blow.

“Sit,” said Worf, and he twisted his fingers in Riker’s collar and yanked him down on the edge of the tub.

“What are you *doing*?” Riker asked.

Worf knelt, uncaring of the shards that tore his trousers open at the knee. He wrapped his fingers around the biggest piece of glass he could find, drawing blood from his palm.

And he pressed that shard into Riker’s hands.

“Ah—” Riker winced, the glass biting into his skin. Hot blood slicked his palm; broad, warm fingers closed around his as Worf held him in place, refusing to let him drop the glass.

“Do it,” Worf said, his voice rough. He twisted Riker’s wrists and pointed the shard of glass right at his throat. “I will watch.”

“Worf, what the hell?”

Worf removed one hand and tapped his communicator. The other hand squeezed even tighter, and the shard of glass sliced deep into Riker’s palms.

“Counselor Troi,” said Worf calmly, “report to Commander Riker’s quarters at once.”

“Worf, no.” Riker tried desperately to jerk his hands out of Worf’s grip. The shard of glass came dangerously close to his throat and he went still, breath catching in his lungs.

“She will witness, too,” said Worf, so reasonable and steady. “We will both watch.”

Riker stared at him uncomprehendingly.

“This is what you wanted, is it not?” said Worf. He nodded to the shard of glass, now streaked with two near-identical shades of blood, Klingon and human. “You agreed once to help me end my life, but only if I allowed Alexander to watch. I am returning the favor.”

“Let go of me,” said Riker, his voice almost inaudible. He was breathing again, but only in short, panting gasps. “It hurts.”

“Then you do not wish to kill yourself?”

Tears burned in Riker’s eyes. “Goddamn it, Worf, I never said I wanted to! This was all you!”

Worf gave him an unimpressed look. Slowly, he unfolded his hands from around Riker's, but he left the shard of glass where it was. Riker knew what to do: open his fingers, let the glass fall. But for just a split second, now that he was free, he could picture his elbows bending, his hands driving that shard of glass with all his might into his throat. Ending it all. Putting a stop to the music. Simulation over, full dark, no stars.

He let the shard of glass go. It had barely hit the floor when Worf clasped Riker's trembling hands in his own.

"Deanna will be here soon," said Worf, so softly that he didn't sound like himself at all. Riker closed his eyes, head bowed, and Worf squeezed his hands so tight that for a moment he couldn't feel the pain of all those lacerations on his palm, all those lines stretching open.

He listened for the music.

This time, it didn't come.

Chapter 30

“You choose the music, Will,” Mrs. Shugak said.

He jumped onto his bed and landed on his knees, close to the shelf over his pillow where he kept his starship models. Will moved them aside as delicately as he could. Hidden behind the Enterprise was a music chip he’d taken from Dad’s collection, and he held his breath as he handed it over to Mrs. Shugak, half-certain she wouldn’t scold him.

She didn’t.

“Play Muddy Waters, please,” Will said, settling down into his bed.

“Muddy Waters?”

There was a click as the chip slotted into the player. Speakers hummed in the floor panels on either side of Will’s bed. The high, keening pluck of a blues guitar filled the room.

“I don’t know how you sleep to this,” said Mrs. Shugak with a sigh.

“It’s good!”

Little Walter’s clear blues harp joined the melody, bending from one note to the next so gracefully it made Will’s toes curl. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back as Mrs. Shugak tucked him in. He didn’t like to be tucked in; as soon as she left, he always kicked and punched at the blankets until he could toss and turn unconstricted. But he never told her.

Her knuckles brushed against his chin. The scent of her hand lotion filled his lungs. He opened his eyes just a crack and caught her looking at him, her face creased.

“You look sad,” Will murmured, and Mrs. Shugak tried to smile.

“It’s the music,” she said. “What’s this one called?”

“She Moves Me,” Will said. “And next is I Feel Like Going Home. Then it switches to John Lee Hooker.”

“Is that the song or the artist?” asked Mrs. Shugak, settling on the edge of the bed. Her weight dipped the mattress and Will rolled toward her.

“The artist. The song is I Hated the Day I Was Born.”

“Cheerful,” said Mrs. Shugak wryly. Will grinned up at her. “You have this whole music chip memorized,” she said.

“Just the good parts.”

She brushed a lock of hair back from his forehead, her touch soft. “Are you going to be a musician when you grow up?”

Will’s smile faded. He studied her face, trying to see if she was serious. For just a brief moment, his chest squeezed tight; his heart soared; he imagined the band behind him, the lights of the stage. Then he found his breath again and shook his head.

“Why not?” Mrs. Shugak asked.

“I get nervous. When other people are listening.”

“But you’d be less nervous as you got older,” Mrs. Shugak said.

Will shook his head firmly.

“Your dad was probably nervous the first few years he played,” Mrs. Shugak offered.

“He’s better than me.”

The look on her face sharpened. “Have you heard him play?” she asked.

“No,” Will said. He didn’t see why that mattered. “He was first chair.”

“In high school,” said Mrs. Shugak. Will couldn’t read her tone; she sounded almost mad at him. But ‘in high school’ ... didn’t that prove his point? He was in accelerated courses for just about everything; he was the youngest student at the flight academy. He took judo. He played Parrises Squares. But he certainly hadn’t been admitted to middle school band yet, let alone high school.

“I’ll be a Starfleet officer,” Will decided.

“Why?” Mrs. Shugak had been glaring at the wall; now she glanced back at him, her face a careful mask. “Because your father works for Starfleet?”

“No. Because it’s what I want to do,” said Will firmly. “I don’t want to work with Dad.”

He regretted saying it immediately. His heart pounded. He waited for the lecture to come and resisted the urge to hide his face beneath the

blanket. Impolite. Ungrateful. But Mrs. Shugak's eyes were soft, and all she did was brush her fingers through his hair.

"You know what?" she said in a whisper. "I don't blame you."

And as Will's eyes widened, she bent down and kissed his forehead. His muscles tensed: livewire fight-or-flight. But it was just a chaste, dry brush of her lips against his skin, and then she pulled away and left him sweating beneath the covers, trembling where she couldn't see.

What was wrong with him?

She stood. She turned the lights off. She paused in the doorway.

What was wrong with him? Really?

"It's laundry day tomorrow," she said, glancing back at him. "Can you strip your bed in the morning for me?"

"Yes," said Will, his voice small.

"Thank you. Sleep well, okay?"

"Okay."

The door closed. Darkness swept in, broken up by the blues guitar and the harmonica, by Muddy Waters' slow, swinging voice. What was wrong with him? Why had he said that about Dad? Why was he so afraid?

Will closed his eyes. He controlled his breathing. He let the music chase all other thoughts away. As he fell asleep, only one thought remained, clear as a clarion call:

He couldn't let Mrs. Shugak wash his sheets.

He'd do it himself.

Chapter 31

“No hospitals,” Riker mumbled, his head still bowed to hide his face.

“Fine,” said Worf. He squeezed Riker’s bleeding hands in his own and stood. Just briefly, he let his palm rest on Riker’s shoulder — thinner, more fragile than he used to be. When he moved away, he left a smear of blood behind on Riker’s uniform. Couldn’t be helped. “Where is your first aid kit?” Worf asked.

Slowly, Riker curled in on himself until his arms were folded over his knees and his face buried in his sleeves. “Under the sink,” he said softly.

Worf had barely gotten it open and balanced on his knee when Riker turned his head. He sniffed, eyes glassy but calm, and looked to the doorway. A moment later, Worf heard the hallway entrance hiss open and knew Deanna had arrived.

“How do you do that?” he asked, calling Riker’s attention back to him.

“What?”

Worf ripped open an antiseptic wipe. “Sense when she is coming.”

“Oh.” Riker’s eyes crinkled in a half-smile, but his heart wasn’t really in it. “Warrior’s instincts, Worf.”

“But only for Counselor Troi,” Worf noted. “Not for any enemies. Your hand?”

Riker held it out, palm up and fingers lightly curled, just as Troi opened the bathroom door. “What’s going— oh,” she said, stopping in her tracks. She surveyed the broken glass over the floor and picked her way around it, sinking to sit on the edge of the tub at Riker’s side. “Will, are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he said, not meeting her eyes. He kept his gaze fixed on Worf, who felt somewhat like a lab specimen as he wiped the blood from Riker’s palm. “Worf’s cleaning me up.”

“What happened?” asked Troi.

She glanced between them. Neither of them was willing to answer. Riker’s blue eyes flashed, silently daring Worf to tell her. Worf kept his face stoic and blank. Both of them decided to lie at the same time.

“Parrises Squares,” said Riker.

“Klingon calisthenics,” said Worf. “In the bathroom.”

“What he said,” said Riker. The flush on his cheeks was gone now; his eyes were dry. “I’m fine,” he said, voice softer than before.

Troi didn’t answer. She just ran her fingers through his hair. Opposite Riker, Worf tried to make himself invisible as he worked, knitting the open gash back together with a zip-stitch. There was a little bottle of liquid painkiller in the kit, and Worf dipped a tiny sterile paintbrush into it and coated Riker’s wound, the bristles tickling his skin. Riker closed his fingers in a flinch.

“Sorry,” he said, opening his hand again. Then, before Worf could even continue: “I can wrap it, Worf. You’ve got your own injuries to see to.”

Worf let out a rumbling snort and ignored that suggestion entirely. He ripped a length of bandages off the roll.

“Captain Picard told me you two attended a concert together,” said Troi, lowering her hand to squeeze Riker’s arm.

“Mm,” he grunted. Worf wrapped the bandages tight around Riker’s injured hand.

“Did you enjoy it?”

No response. Worf cleaned and bandaged the next wound in total silence, keeping his eyes down. Riker’s fingertips hooked against his own in a brief squeeze, maybe a thank you, and then Worf finally turned to his own minor wounds. He risked a quick peek at Riker and Troi ... and got the distinct impression that they were still talking, even though their lips were firmly closed. They kept making ... *expressions*. Little gestures. A slight shrug from Troi; a flick of the fingers from Riker; a nod of the head.

“Hmph,” Worf said, and both Riker and Troi broke apart with a blush.

“Have you eaten yet?” Troi asked, breaking the silence almost sheepishly. Riker stared down at his bandaged hands, his fingertips poking out beneath the gauze.

“No. I was supposed to help Guinan in Ten-Forward. I...”

“She wouldn’t want you bleeding all over the dishes anyway,” said Troi with a smile. Riker’s lips lifted in a pale imitation of her. Troi ran her hand up and down his arm in a brisk goodbye — just a temporary one — and stood, and Riker clasped her hand until the very last second, when he couldn’t reach her anymore. Outside, in Riker’s quarters, Worf could hear Troi speaking to the replicator, calling up a mix of Klingon and human foods.

“Thank you,” said Riker almost inaudibly, his eyes down again.

“I am cleaning up my own mess,” Worf reminded him. He stood, shoving the medkit back under the sink with a kick of his boot. “Can you stand?”

“Of course I can stand,” said Riker, his eyebrows furrowing. But he didn’t try. Palms twinging, Worf tucked his hands under Riker’s arms and hauled him to his feet. Riker’s fingers twisted in Worf’s sleeves, clinging to him for balance. “Watch the glass,” he murmured as Worf walked him out.

Worf resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He wrapped Riker’s arm around his shoulder and led him into the bedroom, where Troi was arranging a heaping pile of steaming plates on the table. She raised an eyebrow at Worf, asking him a silent question...

...but unlike Riker, he couldn’t read her mind.

“You’ll join us for dinner?” Troi asked him as he set Riker down on the edge of the bed.

“Sure he will,” said Riker.

Worf resisted the impulse to say no. “This is my station,” he said solemnly. “Until morning.”

So, at Riker’s gesture, he sat at the dinner table and made himself a plate. Dinner was brief. None of them had much appetite. But it was a light-hearted affair, with both Worf and Riker a little clumsier than usual thanks to their bandages — and it was easy to goad Riker into eating Klingon food, insisting that it would be too intense for him. Worf suspected that Riker had more to eat during this single dinner than he had in all his days in sickbay.

He was still pale. He was still too thin. And he still looked drained.

But he was eating, and he hadn’t shoved that shard of glass into his throat. That was something.

When he finished with his food, Worf took the leftovers to the reclaimator and swept the bathroom out. The mirror was gone now, and he was crouching on the bathroom floor, picking up small crystals of glass with a piece of tape, when he heard a click of a button outside and the slow, soft start of a blues song. With a slight shake of his head, Worf finished up and exited, just in time to see Deanna helping Will into his pajama top, her lips brushing against his hair as she adjusted the sleeve.

“Will you stay?” Will asked.

Worf waited for her to answer. Only when she looked over her shoulder at him did he realize the question wasn’t for Troi.

“Me?” he asked.

“It’s your duty, isn’t it?” asked Will wryly. But there was a touch of nervousness in his eyes.

“I will stay,” Worf decided. He planted his feet and kept his face blank as Will turned off the lights with Deanna still here. He made no expression whatsoever when Deanna slid into bed on Will’s left side. But his mask broke, just a little, when Will’s bandaged hand emerged from under the covers and reached for him.

Don’t just stand there, Will would say. Or: There’s no sense in standing at attention all night. Come to bed.

But really, Will said nothing. He just held his hand out and waited. Over the soft music, Worf could hear only one person breathing: Deanna, quiet and slow. But Worf and Will were holding their breath.

Worf took Will’s hand. He slid under the covers fully-dressed. He thought of sickbay, the terror of a spinal injury, of paralysis, that bone-deep certainty he’d felt that he would never walk again, never live up to the Klingon code. And the way Will had railed against him, refused to give in. To let him die. With a slow sigh, Worf tugged at Will’s hand, bringing it to rest over his stomach. Here, Will could feel the rise and fall of Worf’s breathing without getting too close. And Worf, in turn, could feel the warmth in Will’s palm, would know if he turned cold, if he tried to move.

Beneath the bandages, both of them were bleeding. But Worf closed his eyes.

“Sleep, you two,” Deanna murmured.

And Worf didn’t feel like fighting her. He slept.

Chapter 32

Risa was a *soft* planet, not suitable to Klingons. The wine was sweet; the food melted in your mouth; the waiters dusted their fingers in sugar so every dish they touched would be what humans called 'palatable.' And the courtesans were unconditioned, unaccustomed to a fight, their bodies soft and supple, their words saccharine and false. There was no honor there.

It was Worf's preference to stay in his quarters aboard the Enterprise and avoid Risa altogether. No one could force him to take shore leave on a planet he despised.

But Deanna could *ask him nicely*, and she did. She found him on her way down to the transport room, already dressed for shore leave, and she put her hand on his forearm, looking up at him with soft dark eyes.

"Are you coming with us?" she asked.

Down the corridor, at the door to the transport room, Worf could see Commander Riker waiting. He wasn't facing Troi and Worf. Unlike Deanna, he still wore his uniform, and Worf couldn't blame him for that; there was no easy, pre-designated outfit to wear when your father was on trial. Riker was chewing on his thumbnail and staring at the wall, his eyes a million light-years away. Worf had never seen him look so ... *disconnected*. So detached. He looked back to Deanna uncertainly.

Would Riker *want* him there? At the trial? He wanted to ask, but there was no way to say it aloud without Riker hearing. But Deanna seemed to read his mind — or at least, she made an educated guess based off his emotions.

"The trial only lasts ten hours a day," Deanna told him. "We'll need someone to drink with after."

"Or spar with," Worf rumbled.

The corner of Deanna's mouth lifted. "Well, I'll leave that to you and Will," she said wryly, and it was only when she hooked her arm in Worf's and led him to the transport room that he realized she'd taken his suggestion as a 'yes.'

And maybe he'd meant it as one. They stopped at Riker's side, waiting for him to notice them. Gradually, his pale eyes snapped back to the present. He looked them up and down briefly, without understanding, and said,

"Ah, Mr. Worf, I didn't realize you were coming down. Couldn't resist the Risians?"

Worf gave Deanna a beady-eyed stare.

"I regret this already," he told her.

And she smiled, and Will laughed, as Worf had known they would.

That was why he said it.

He saw Commander Riker twice during their stay on Risa. Only twice.

Despite Deanna's invitation, Worf was never called out of his quarters for a night of drinking. Nor was he summoned to the beach in the morning to spar. Each day, at break of dawn, Commander Riker left his quarters with dark smudges under his eyes and a new paleness to his face; and each evening, when court had adjourned for the day, Commander Riker made his way back to his room and barricaded himself inside.

But there were two exceptions.

The first night, past midnight, Riker knocked on Worf's door. He was already smiling when Worf answered — that devilish grin, his eyes bright and crinkled, his whole face transforming until he looked ten years younger and liable to start fires if left unsupervised. There was a bottle of green Risian liquor in his hand, a deck of cards trapped awkwardly between the glass and Riker's thumb.

"Poker?" Riker offered.

Worf's mind stopped working for a moment. "With only two people?" he asked.

Riker gave an easy shrug and came inside. "You know any two-player games?" he asked. "Good ones. No Crazy Eights."

He set the bottle down on the low coffee table in the center of Worf's hotel room. Beaded cushions surrounded it, and Riker sank down onto one without ceremony, his legs crossed beneath him. He tossed the pack of cards at Worf's chest.

"War," Worf suggested.

Riker laughed. "You *would* suggest War. What about gin rummy?"

"I do not know the rules," said Worf, easing himself onto one of the cushions.

"Egyptian ratscrew?"

"You are making things up."

Riker pulled an exaggerated face of shock. He put an offended hand against his chest ... but then he just shrugged. "Alright. I'll teach you gin rummy. You'll like it."

Worf just grunted. He let Riker shuffle the cards, a little too tired for a game, but willing to stay up. In his pajamas, with his hair down, he knew he looked a bit ruffled. But Riker, still in his uniform, hair combed and wide awake, somehow managed to look even more tired. There was an exhaustion lingering behind his smiles, a softness to his voice that didn't suit his jokes.

And he only lasted one hand before he stopped making jokes entirely. Two hands before his smiles faded. Three before he stopped talking, stopped paying attention.

He didn't crack open the bottle of liquor. He left before the hour was up.

The second time was different. Worf was out at the market when the court adjourned; it was still daylight, and the briny scent of fish blood filled the air by the sea, ferric enough to draw Worf's interest. To his disgust, the Risians had a tradition of soaking their fish in a syrupy sauce filled with sugar and pulped fruit. He left the market empty-handed and in a foul mood.

And when he entered his quarters, Riker was asleep in Worf's bed.

Worf froze. He shut the door silently behind him and studied Riker, searching for clues — was he really asleep, or just pretending? His breathing was even and slow. He lay face down, his head turned to the side, only part of his face visible. And that portion was pale and drained, but peaceful. More or less.

He was still in uniform. He must have traveled straight here. Why Worf's room? Why not his own?

The answer was obvious but it made Worf uneasy somehow. Riker had chosen Worf's room because here, he was safe. Deep in his bones Worf knew this to be true.

But why, on Risa, would Riker feel unsafe? Did the locals know who he was? Perhaps. Blame him for his father's actions? Likely, but Worf's soul rebelled against the idea. He circled the bed to study Riker's face better and watched the eyelashes quiver, some sleeping part of Riker's mind responding to the change in light.

He didn't wake Riker. He let him stay; he ignored the calls from Deanna and Picard, asking if Worf had seen him. When night fell, Worf eased himself onto the bed at Riker's side, fully clothed, and fell into a shallow sleep of his own, his dreams set to the rhythm of Riker's lungs, his heart. This way he would be attuned to any sudden change. Any threat.

In the morning, Riker woke first, after what Worf estimated to be twelve hours of uninterrupted sleep. By then, in sleep, they'd rolled against each other, Riker on his stomach and Worf on his back, their sides pressed together, their arms pinned. If Riker was surprised by this arrangement, he didn't show it. He simply pushed himself to his feet with a sigh — scrubbed his face with his hands — combed his fingers through his hair. Briefly, by accident, he met Worf's eyes.

He flashed a guilty smile.

"Must've been drinking," he said. "Walked into the wrong room."

And he was a rotten actor, really. He blushed at the lie, even though Worf didn't call him on it. And when Worf only stared at him, no expression, Riker swallowed his smile and looked away.

"Nothing happened," said Worf steadily, playing along.

Riker nodded.

"Did you mean for something to happen?" Worf asked in the same tone, one eyebrow raised.

Riker's lips twitched. A half-smile died before it was really born. He rubbed his thumb against his index finger and stared at the floor.

"Did you—?" Worf started again. But Riker darted forward and Worf's breath froze in his lungs. Riker took his hand and squeezed it tight, close enough to kiss. But he saw the alarmed expression on Worf's face and he only smiled.

"I'll see you tonight," he said glibly. "For gin rummy."

Slowly, Worf nodded his head. Riker squeezed his fingers one more time — teasingly hard this time, trying to goad Worf into squeezing back — but Worf let his hand stay limp and unmoving. Riker bounded out of the room without a goodbye. More cheerful now. More energized. More himself.

But he didn't come back that night to play cards. In fact, for the rest of their time on Risa, he didn't come back at all.

Chapter 33

Will's last class was out for the day, and a dusty silence had fallen over the instruction pods. He ought to be going. The next piloting course was scheduled for an hour from now, but until then, the pods were empty, and Will couldn't force himself to move. Not for the holodeck session he'd promised to attend with DeWalt. Not for his therapy call with Dr. Macnair.

Nothing.

He propped one knee up, his foot planted on the dashboard, where he could idly move the steering stick. The stars onscreen shifted obediently every time he did, rotating to reveal a new constellation, a distant planet, a starship hanging far ahead. Will balanced his PADD on his knee and dragged numb fingers over a directory of Enterprise personnel, listlessly searching through the names.

His legs felt like the old felled tree he used to cross Curtis Creek when he was a kid, cold and thick and water-logged. He curled one hand around his dick, a useless and insensate piece of flesh, and scanned the names before him.

VISITORS, one heading read. Will tapped it. He called up their personnel photos, chewing the inside of his cheek. None of them were particularly good-looking — but there was one man, tall and burly, whose broad hands were visible in his photo: long, thick fingers knotted together over his stomach, knuckles like scarred knots on a tree. The longer Will eyed him the more right he seemed. Dark crescent eyes, like Picard's, and a Roman nose, and a shock of gray hair like Kyle's. Mouth dry, Will elbowed the computer screen built inside the pod.

"Computer, locate..." He read the name from the list. "...Ambassador Lockett."

"Ambassador Lockett is in Guest Quarters Alpha One."

No knowing if he'd be receptive, but it was worth a try. Will gave his cock one last pointless squeeze and hauled his feet off the dashboard. Outside, in the empty simulation room, he raked his fingers through his hair and smelled his clothes, senses tuned to the faint whiff of dry sweat. He'd have to change first. And that meant walking all the way to his quarters first, then all the way back here, because guest quarters were on Deck Five.

Will squared his shoulders.

He exited the room.

He faced the crowd.

They were all staring at him.

They couldn't help it, Will knew, so he kept his face frozen in a pleasant grin, and whenever a crewman accidentally made eye contact with him, he did his best to nod. He remembered being an ensign on the Pegasus, trying not to stare at the first officer after Captain Pressman dressed him down. This was the same, really. Only ten times worse.

By the time he reached the turbolift, Will was hyper-cognizant of his reflection in the shiny mirrored walls: waxy skin and shadowed eyes, a too-thin frame swallowed up by civilian clothes. Beneath his loose trousers, his knees were trembling just hard enough to be visible to anyone who glanced down. He swept a hand over the back of his neck and felt warm skin, almost feverish, coated in a fresh layer of sweat.

Change, he told himself. *Shower*. He pictured Ambassador Lockett's stern face, that no-nonsense body type. *It'll be fine*.

But what did his students think of him when he taught them how to fly? *Look at this walking skeleton — this mental patient — that's our instructor?*

Will left the turbolift on Deck Eight, legs numb.

What did his *crewman* think of him when they passed him in the halls? Three sickbay stays in the last month, each longer than the last — rumors of suicide attempts — night guards and holodeck escorts, and *I heard his father—*

Will pushed through his bedroom door, already removing his shirt. Sweat had soaked through the material, leaving it so sheer that you could see his skin tone and chest hair underneath, but only when he pulled it over his head could you see the ridges of each rib.

Cut the self-pity, Will told himself calmly, and like magic, the knot in his throat packed up and moved away. He studied himself in the mirror. Skin tight over muscle and bone. Actually, not bad, he decided. He'd needed to lose some weight, to cut down a little. Not because he looked bad naked, but because the uniform wasn't all that flattering to athletic types — small-boned people like Deanna could look gorgeous in it; Captain Picard, compact and trim, didn't look bad. But for Will, for Worf, that uniform was a nightmare, and he was glad to have changed. He smoothed a hand over his rib cage — down to the narrow ridge of his hip — and decided he looked younger. Twenty-three again, limber, athletic, ready to go.

In the shower, with soap sudsing up his hair, Will re-assessed the situation. There was no way Ambassador Lockett would say no. In his file it said he was from Telemaque. On Telemaque, marriages customarily included two men and one woman, so Lockett would be open, willing. And Will had faith in his own charm, his ability to 'play cute' — he'd been doing it since he was a toddler. As he wiped the grime of sweat from his arms and legs, Will made an effort to visualize himself walking out of Lockett's quarters a little taller, chest puffed, head up, a spark of vitality in his eyes, of color on his cheeks.

Just what he needed. Just what he wanted. Just the thing to wash the bitter aftertaste of weakness away.

On the bridge, Captain Picard's combadge chirped. He tapped it by habit, then ducked his head to the ambassador and stepped away with a muttered, "Excuse me." Over by the command chair, he said, "Picard here."

"Sir. Captain. Uh."

He didn't recognize the voice. Cognizant of the ambassador's eyes on him, Picard snapped, "Name and rank."

"Lieutenant Bixley, sir. I was supposed to meet Commander Riker for kickboxing on Holodeck Three."

"And?" said Picard.

A nervous pause. "He's not here, sir."

Picard stuffed his concern deep into the back of his brain. Next to him, Counselor Troi stood up as if compelled to by some unseen puppetmaster, and drifted over to Picard's side.

"Do commanding officers typically report to you, Lieutenant?" asked Picard calmly.

"Er, no, sir. I just thought—"

"Commander Riker is not your responsibility, Lieutenant. You are his."

"Aye, sir."

"Then resume your kickboxing session," said Picard impatiently, "and next time you consider calling me, consider your chain of command. Picard out."

He met Deanna's eyes, both of them carefully blank. With a nod, Picard dismissed her. He already regretted his sharp tone with the lieutenant — it was sure to dissuade him from reporting in the next time something like this happened — but it had been necessary, both to preserve Riker's dignity as first officer and to establish proper Starfleet conduct in front of the guests. He would have to lock up his concerns and let Deanna take charge of Riker's health.

His heart was hammering in his chest when he rejoined the ambassador, but he forced a smile and clasped his hands together.

"Where were we?" he asked.

She didn't need the computer to find Will. His emotions left a blood trail straight down Deck Eight to his closed bedroom door. By the time Deanna reached it, he'd noticed her coming, and his mind stretched out to greet hers: sunlight bathing the pleating of her brain, bringing with it all the dark shadows and quick, chill breezes of a summer day on Betazed, just before a thunderstorm. But it was gentle, welcoming, and when Deanna entered Will's bedroom, her first thought was:

He looks good.

Her second thought was, *He's manipulating me.*

"Deanna," he said. Warm fingers wrapped around her own and pulled her close — a quick kiss on the cheek, dry lips, the scent of soap. Deanna dipped into his emotions again, this time pushing through the veil of sunshine.

"Will," she said, "you didn't show up to your holodeck appointment."

"I'm not allowed a little flexibility?" He shifted the kiss into a hug, holding her close against him. Probably so she couldn't read his face.

"Lieutenant Bixley was worried about you," Deanna said, with a tight mental grip on the thread of darkness in Will's mind. At her words, the blackness pulsed and vibrated, growing thicker in her hands. That was the key, then. She pushed a little harder, just to test it. "He called Captain Picard on the bridge." Another pulse. "In front of the ambassador."

"Ambassador Lockett?" Will asked, his voice a little rough. His grip on her remained impossibly gentle.

"Yes," Deanna said, and the thread between her thumb and forefinger practically sang. A discordant note. A bow scraping the wrong way across a violin's strings. She sighed against Will's chest and pulled away so she could look him in the eye. "Will, did something happen?"

He studied her face. Affectionate blue eyes. Curving lips. Distracted. She knew he was going to lean in for a kiss before he did it, so she ducked away, gave him a warning look.

"Will," she said.

He relaxed his grip obediently, from a lover's hug to the close platonic comfort of a friend. "Nothing happened," he sighed. "I was in the flight simulation pods, and when class was over, I just ... didn't feel like kickboxing." She could sense the lie coalescing in his brain before it crystallized. "I was just sore," he said. "That flight simulator really knocks you around."

"You weren't sore," Deanna said. Begrudgingly, she added, "But I'm impressed by how convincing that was."

Will smirked.

"Walk me through it," Deanna requested. "The class. How did it go?"

“Seriously?” He checked her expression, saw that she meant it, and put on a pout. But at least he listened; she could sense the wheels turning as he examined his memory. “We started out with the standard cargo delivery course modeled after Jupiter Station.”

“The one you did junior year at the Academy,” Deanna remembered.

“Don’t remind me.” He grinned a little. “You know, I was supposed to go on an away mission all the way out to Parthos Two? One of only two cadets accepted into the program.”

“No, I didn’t know that. What happened?”

His smile fractured. “Got into a fight with my fellow cadets at the end of the year,” he said. “That was sixty demerits. Then I got caught, uh, with a different cadet, on Forger’s Field…”

“How many demerits was that?” Deanna asked.

“Another forty. One hundred demerits in less than a week. My slot got canceled and I was sent to Jupiter instead.”

He sighed again — deeper this time, yet quieter — and rested his chin on top of her head. Deanna thought back to Betazed, those early weeks when they could talk for hours, because neither of them had heard each other’s stories. He’d mentioned his junior year before, but never the fight, never getting caught on Forger’s Field or losing his prestigious spot at Parthos II. What he *had* mentioned was that one day, close to the end of the spring semester, he emerged from his survival class into the Academy gardens — and saw his father chatting with the commandant. He’d frozen where he stood: hadn’t known his dad was in San Francisco: never imagined he’d have to see him here, didn’t know what to say, what to do. But in the end his father had turned away without even seeing him, and Will had been spared the ordeal of smiling or waving hello.

Interesting that he failed to connect those events back then. Interesting that he failed to connect them now. Gently, Deanna nudged him to take a seat, and she allowed him to keep a grip on her hand as retreated to the edge of his bed.

“You were simulating the Jupiter run,” she reminded him. “Then what?”

Will smiled a little. “We finished early. Lopez wanted to run some battle simulations—”

“You call the children by their last names?”

“They like it,” said Will defensively. “It makes them feel like cadets.”

Deanna shook her head with a grin.

“I programmed something from my time on the Pegasus,” Will said. He stared down at the floor, his humor dying. “It was a tricky little maneuver to break free from a tractor beam. It takes a lot of toggling with the steering stick — and a good sense of balance. Lopez got it on the first try, failed on the second. No one else got it at all.”

His emotions spiraled.

“No one?” Deanna prompted. “Even the instructor?”

Will’s lips lifted in a half-hearted grin. “I tried to show them the trick to it,” he said, eyes on the ground. “You have to turn your shields off with your left hand and slam your left elbow hard port at the same time. And keep your right hand on the steering stick, even if it hits you in the face.”

“Difficult to pull off,” Deanna said.

“But foolproof. Lopez found the easy way, but she couldn’t replicate it. This way, you get it right every time.” He shrugged. “Only I couldn’t get it. My right hand cramped. I kept letting go.”

Deanna skimmed a hand down his arm and examined his right hand. It still had a deep scar over the palm where he’d sliced his hand open just days ago. He hadn’t gone to Beverly yet to get it removed, and soon, he’d lose his chance. She rubbed a circle on the scar with her thumb, gentle pressure, rhythmic motion.

“So,” she summarized, “you felt inadequate.”

“Me? Never.”

“And you felt *conspicuous*. Because everyone says you’re the best pilot in Starfleet, and here you are, struggling with a maneuver you perfected as an ensign…”

“I wouldn’t say *perfected*,” Will protested. “It’s kind of a messy solution—”

“And all those cadets watched you fail,” Deanna continued, her thumb still stroking that gentle circle on Will’s palm. He stopped arguing with her. His head was down, his long dark lashes hiding his eyes. He watched the slow, predictable motion of her thumb. “Did you stay back to try to perfect it?” Deanna asked.

Will’s chest rose in a slow breath. “No,” he said. “I stayed, but I just watched the stars.”

Deanna tilted her head to the side. She studied Will’s face, the hollow cheeks and stress lines, the visible ridge of his collarbone peeking through the neck of his shirt. Conspicuous. Everywhere he went, he ran into crewmen, and he couldn’t hide what he’d become. They could see

the weight he'd shed, the trembling in his hands or in his smile; some of them had read the news from Risa; others had heard the rumors that he'd been found in the holodeck, half-drowned, or that he'd instigated a fight between Worf and Ibsen, or that he'd checked himself into a psych hold for two weeks. There were rumors that he'd be grounded, or permanently relieved of rank.

"I think," said Deanna quietly, shifting her grip to hold Will's hand, "that right now, you feel as though your weaknesses are on full display. Secretly, you wonder if your crew has lost respect for you. You suspect that Starfleet will cut you loose any second now. Abandon you." She squeezed his hand. "So you came back here, you showered, you selected your best clothes, and you were going to go seduce someone. Is that right?"

"That doesn't make sense," said Will, his voice rough.

"Doesn't it?" Deanna dipped a finger into his open collar. His chest hair brushed her skin as she tweaked the silky fabric. "Who did you choose?"

"Is it any of your business?"

She just raised an eyebrow. *No*, she said, letting the word soothe over his tense mind. *But you'll feel better if you tell me.*

His shoulders relaxed a little. He could see now how ridiculous his choice had been, and he admitted it with a faint air of embarrassment and self-deprecating humor. "Ambassador Luckett."

Deanna wrinkled her nose.

"What?" Will asked. "He's not that ugly."

"No," Deanna said. But he looked an awful lot like Will's father. And like Picard. She boxed that thought away to examine it later. "I think it makes sense. You enjoy making love — you like to give pleasure."

"I'm not opposed to receiving it," he murmured. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the heel of her palm.

"And it makes you feel loved," Deanna said.

No answer.

"It makes you feel like you're *worth* something," Deanna said. She tried to say it without any moisture in her eyes, without a knot in her throat, but she didn't quite manage. And Will, sensing her tears, huffed out a choked laugh, reacted physiologically, like he always did when she cried — with a sympathetic rush of sadness to match hers. He kissed her palm again, a fierce press of the lips.

"Lie down," Deanna said, her voice shaking.

His eyes flashed. He lowered himself down without letting go of her hand. Easily, Deanna fell over his chest — the familiar warmth of his body, the rise and fall of his steady, even breaths. She tucked her face against his neck and let her lips drag over his pulse point, fingers skimming under his shirt to touch bare skin, to curl in his chest hair. Each kiss was slow and languid; every touch coaxed her nerves to life. But when she straddled his hips, when her thumbs stroked over his nipples and her teeth nipped at his throat, she could feel the softness of his cock against her. No amount of rocking, of gentle, teasing touches or sharp nails raking against skin, seemed to help it. Deanna broke off the kiss and leaned against him, their breathing synced.

"Sorry," he murmured.

She couldn't think of anything to say. Her mind enfolded his, a wordless rush of comfort. He let it happen, but his soul was like a hard impenetrable stone; her warmth, her light, brushed over it and formed a fragile shell, but she couldn't sink inside. Every time she examined the porous surface and thought she found a way, she'd dip inside and discover nothing there. Just pits and jagged surfaces. An empty cave, no light, no living beings, just cold water and the sound of insects scuttling over rocks and the damp scent of wet earth, packed tight.

"Deanna," Will said softly. He shifted beneath her, one hand intruding between their bodies to cover himself between the legs. His knuckles poked against her body, so uncomfortable that with a sigh she slid off him and lay at his side.

"Can I stay?" she asked.

Eyes closed, he pulled her closer. He didn't answer verbally. Just with a wave of emotion, a barrage of images: the blankets tangled around their waists, the warmth of her body against his own. *Stay*. Beneath that, there was the sense of inadequacy again, of weaknesses on display, muted but still there, so when he kissed her sleepily — down her throat, over her breasts, his lips lingering on the ticklish spot where her waist met her pelvis — Deanna wasn't surprised. She let him slide lower, between her legs, slow and wet and warm, his tongue exploring every inch of her—

And then, fingers curled in the sheets, hair damp with sweat, Deanna glanced sideways and groaned.

"Your PADD's lit up," she said breathlessly, through clenched teeth.

Will kept working, a soft sweep of brown hair hiding his face. Deanna twitched her thighs to get his attention.

"Will. I forgot to—"

He turned his head, wet lips brushing against her inner thigh.

"—alert the captain—" Deanna said, and she was still trying to grasp the loss of warmth, of touch, when Will climbed over her to check his

PADD. His thoughts slowed, swirled, concentrated on the message there. He turned to look at her, cheeks still flushed, lips still swollen.

“What is it?” Deanna asked, reaching for him.

He eased down at her side. One hand dipped between her legs while the other pulled her closer, her back against his stomach, his PADD propped up where she could read it. Deanna leaned into his touch, hips rocking, and read the orders Picard had sent.

“He has a mission ready for me,” Will murmured, his breath warm against Deanna’s throat. He kissed her slowly, to the same steady rhythm of his fingers, of her hips. “When I’m released to active duty.”

A mission. Deanna read the orders again, start to finish, and closed her eyes. In Will’s mind, where there had been numbness, something new was budding. New, familiar. A rush of relief, desperate, soothing. A sense of self-worth. An eagerness to please.

Deanna twisted around in his arms and grasped his cock.

“I swear, Will Riker,” she said forbiddingly, “if you get hard from Captain Picard’s orders—”

He just laughed.

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