

Noli Me Tangere // Touch Me Not

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/608) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/608>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Rape/Non-Con
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Star Trek: The Next Generation
Relationship:	Deanna Troi/William Riker
Character:	William Riker , Deanna Troi , Taylor Donovan (OMC)
Additional Tags:	Remix , Hurt/Comfort , Past Rape/Noncon , Recovery , Sexual Slavery , Torture , Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) , Whump , Illegal Drug Use
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-07-06 Completed: 2023-07-09 Words: 44,468 Chapters: 15/15

Noli Me Tangere // Touch Me Not

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Summary

The Enterprise's first officer has been missing for over a year when a malnourished, heavily scarred sex slave on a nowhere-planet called Ipsand puts up a distress signal...

...using a Starfleet combadge.

Notes

This is a remix/love letter to Gill Marsden's "The Greatest of All Things Blue" from A Matter of Honor #3. I don't know if this fanfic has ever been uploaded online, so bee and I made sure that the remix is 100% readable/understandable on its own. But if you want a copy of the original fic, and don't mind reading it from photos I took on my phone, drop me your gmail and I'll share the files with you!

If you're familiar with the original fic, the biggest differences are these:

- 1) Beverly was not stranded with Riker; she remained on the Enterprise the whole time
- 2) The replacement first officer doesn't simply leave the Enterprise when Riker returns. The fic is from his POV.

Thanks for reading, hope you enjoy some good old-fashioned whump!

Chapter 1

“You’re certain?” Captain Picard asked.

First Officer Lieutenant Commander Donovan nodded, and that nod punched the wind out of Picard’s lungs. He circled his desk like a sleepwalker, one hand trailing the wood grain for support, and then he sank into his seat. Like a man lost, he searched his room. His eyes lit on the fish tank and stayed there.

“It’s been more than a year,” Picard said softly.

Donovan remained silent, awaiting orders. Light from the fish tank reflected off Picard’s eyes in an unreliable flicker. Finally, Picard consulted his padd.

“You said the signal comes from an Ensign Marv Wheeler, of Space Station 115,” Picard said. “According to our records, Wheeler was found dead three months after his disappearance on a scouting mission. His combadge *was* missing.”

“Whoever is transmitting this signal, sir, might be laying a trap,” Donovan pointed out.

“Or it may be a genuine call for help.”

That went without saying. Picard’s features hardened as he studied the padd.

“You say the signal comes from a Ferengi ship?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Assemble an away team, Number—” Donovan closed his eyes against the stumble. Picard corrected himself with a sharp cough. “—Commander. Take Lieutenant Worf and anyone else you may need. The discretion is yours.”

“We’re storming the ship, sir?” Donovan asked, a hard glint in his eye.

Picard lifted his chin. Softly, he corrected Donovan.

“We’re finding our missing officer.”

It wasn’t the first time Picard had accidentally called him “Number One” – or started to. “Number One” was, after all, a standard nickname for any first officer. Donovan was not the type of man to receive permanent assignments – he flitted, stolid and expressionless, from one temporary posting to the next, as Starfleet saw fit. But he’d been on enough ships to know that the first officer, his position, was almost *always* called “Number One.”

It didn’t sting him. It didn’t concern him, either – his assessment of Picard was of a steady, ruthlessly professional man. But it did indicate perhaps an inordinate amount of care for the missing officer, and Donovan liked to keep track of such inordinacies. He glanced around at his away team – Mr. Worf towered over him – and gave them a smile.

“No casualties,” he reminded Worf. “We are boarding their ship, so some hostility is natural, but we can’t take it as automatic evidence of wrongdoing. It’s our duty to de-escalate. Understand?”

Worf, as ever, pretended not to see Donovan looking up at him. His answer was a surly, “Aye, sir.” He made a big show of setting his phaser to ‘stun’. Donovan let it slide and stepped up onto the transporter pad, taking his place among the team. He was slighter, shorter, than all of them, with close-cropped blonde hair that made him look like a child, especially at Worf’s side – but it was his pale, sun-strained eyes that the transporter chief looked into for confirmation.

“Energize,” Donovan said.

There were three shivering Ferengi in the hold, and one stolen Starfleet combadge, still transmitting a signal. Donovan turned it off with a swipe of the thumb. These were backwater Ferengi, low-level traders. They wore the tribal patterns of the Ferum clan, exiled centuries ago to a system of resource-dry planets. Donovan paced before them, noting the scabs of disease on their lips, the slack mouth on their leader, the confused eyes and constant fidgeting. He tossed the combadge onto the table before them.

“Do you know what this is?” he asked.

The leader jolted in his seat. True anger crossed his face. “That!” he spat. “You came for that?”

Donovan tapped his own combadge. “It’s Starfleet property, and we are Starfleet. Yes, we came for it.”

The leader spat at Donovan’s feet. “It isn’t even gold,” he said derisively. “We were tricked.”

“Tricked? By whom?”

They exchanged stubborn glances. They would withhold the information just to spite him. Donovan considered his options, running a finger over the edge of Wheeler’s combadge.

“You know,” he said, “the ensign who owned this combadge was murdered—” (Well, by a poisonous plant, which he willingly ingested because he thought it looked like parsley) “—and my guess is, he set this combadge to transmit before he died. That’s how we found you.” He shook the combadge and watched a shade of fury fall over the leader’s eyes. “Either *you’re* the murderer, or you got this combadge *from* the murderer,” Donovan said. “Tell me which.”

A low growl escaped from the Ferengi’s throat.

“Lowlife,” he muttered, and at first Donovan thought he was being insulted. “Some Human lowlife. A sick man, an addict in search of painkillers. Drugs. He robbed us blind.”

“Robbed you of what?” asked Donovan, his interest wilting.

“Dryhaxalyn,” one of the leader’s companions replied.

Dryhaxalyn. It was an old drug, illegal throughout the Federation, a sort of performance enhancement drug used to lower inhibitions and make unwilling partners more pliable. The likelihood that this thief was their missing officer had just become incredibly slim, but it was still possible – the dryhaxalyn could have been stolen to barter for supplies, and the thief might not even know what he had taken. Donovan boxed up his disappointment.

“Where was this?” he asked. “Which planet?”

“Backwater,” said the leader with a shake of the head.

“Tell me.”

They conferred with each other, as if they couldn’t recall. Donovan caught a whisper or two as they argued over the name. Ispland? Prysand?

Ipsand. He’d seen it in the starmap. Populated but impoverished, low-tech, not yet a Federation member. Donovan sucked in a breath.

“Give me the exact coordinates of where you met this man,” he said.

The leader looked up at him, sharp-eyed. “And what will you give us as payment?”

Donovan tossed him the scratched old combadge.

“Gold,” he said.

“It is a lie,” said Worf firmly.

Worf was not one for small talk, especially when Donovan was around. Donovan couldn’t say why, for certain – but he’d heard Worf was close to the missing officer, not just as friends, but in terms of physicality and prowess. They were the same height, a good match on the dojo floor; and the Enterprise’s former first officer had served on Klingon vessels, had a taste for Klingon food. To trade someone like that for Donovan, pale and slight, sedate and spotlight-shy, must have been jarring.

This was the first Worf had spoken since they entered the shuttle.

“What’s a lie?” Donovan asked, his voice mild. In the copilot’s seat, he kept his eyes on the sensors, searching for Human life-signs.

“The Ferengi,” Worf growled.

“The Ferengi didn’t lead us here,” Donovan reminded him. He called up a map of Ipsand and set his search for the uninhabited fields to the north. “That combadge did. You watched Mr. La Forge access its broadcast history. This is where the signal ends.”

Worf made a dismissive sound deep in his throat. “Not this,” he said in a grunt. His shoulders bristled, but like any good Starfleet officer, he made an effort to rein his emotions in. “He said the man who sold this combadge was an addict and a thief.” Now he met Donovan’s eyes, and the firmness there made Donovan catch his breath. “Commander Riker is neither,” Worf said. There was so much certainty in his voice that Donovan didn’t bother to respond. A dim surge of affection warmed his chest as he turned back to the scans.

What he saw there made the affection flatten out.

“Life signs,” he said calmly – so calmly that Worf seemed not to hear him at first. Donovan put in the coordinates and set them to flash across the windshield. “Life signs,” he said again, and this time the numbers on the screen plus the sound of Donovan’s voice combined to break through. Worf jolted in his seat. He corrected his course immediately, swinging the steering stick so sharply that Donovan clutched at his arm rests.

“A village?” Worf asked, his voice a little too steady to be convincing.

Donovan did a quick check. “No other life signs in the area. Just one Human in the middle of a field.”

Worf’s jaw tightened. He kicked up the speed until the roar of atmosphere against the shuttle’s hull was deafening. Donovan swayed in his seat but kept his eyes laser-focused on the tracker. Only when the blinking white dot on the screen lined up with their shuttle did he glance out the windshield.

A farmhouse loomed before them.

It was low and domed to protect it from the vicious local winds, and at the apex of that dome, part of the roof had caved in to reveal the

wooden latticework rafters underneath. A tattered screen door swung on its hinges, leaving the entrance to the farmhouse unguarded.

And outside, with a broken hatch and weeds growing up around its buffers, was a Romulan shuttle.

“Scrapped,” Worf said, his voice tight. He brought their shuttle down and kept his eyes on the Romulan craft like he expected an army to burst out of it, disruptor pistols blasting. But he was right. Donovan climbed out of the shuttle, the wind blowing his hair back and bringing water to his eyes, and saw that the shuttle had been gutted, its power cells harvested, its protective paneling unscrewed and lugged away.

Donovan jumped down, sending up a puff of pale chaff when he landed. Behind him, he could hear the low rumble of Worf’s voice communicating with the Enterprise – but it was Donovan who entered the decrepit house and tested his weight on the warped wooden floors. He avoided a spot where the boards had fallen through, deadly-looking splinters jutting toward the sky. Fresh animal droppings littered the kitchen floor, and Donovan assumed they’d entered through the open crawlspace and rifled through the food – only on closer look, there *was* no food. An old, broken replicator lay in pieces on the counter; the cupboards were empty.

And in the next room, there came a hoarse gasp for air.

Donovan put one hand on his phaser. He edged through the bedroom door on silent feet. The bed was filthy, its mattress gutted, and atop it lay a tall thin figure Donovan almost didn’t recognize. The naked body was covered in scars; ribs stuck through the sweat-slick flesh like alien ridges; weakened ab muscles tensed and bunched as the Human arched his back – a convulsion, but without any strength.

Donovan passed a hand over the Human’s forehead. Stubble stood out on an otherwise clean-shaven face. Long, greasy hair clung to the ruined mattress. But when the Human’s eyes opened, feverish and pale blue, Donovan recognized him.

“I’m Lieutenant Commander Donovan of the U.S.S. Enterprise,” Donovan said. “Do you hear me?”

The eyelids dipped. Cracked lips parted. No sound came out. Behind Donovan, there was a careful slide of boots over the rotten floor as Worf joined him and drew up short.

“Beam us straight to sickbay,” Donovan whispered, keeping his voice soothing, calm. Worf tapped his combadge viciously enough to leave a bruise. While he gave the order, Donovan pushed back the dying man’s hair, offering him a little comfort.

“We’ve been looking for you, Commander Riker,” he said softly. “Welcome home.”

Chapter 2

The medics swarmed them as soon as they materialized in sickbay. Scanners flashed — someone manhandled Donovan out of the way — an orderly ushered Worf out and shut the door. Probably a good idea, Donovan decided, although it rankled him: Worf was a mess, and he wanted nothing more than to be here, but a week from now, when his emotions cooled, he'd regret letting everyone see his reaction.

Donovan smoothed out his own expression and kept a wide berth from the medical team. He circled them like a shadow, listening to the results of every scan. Malnutrition and dehydration were the worst of it, possibly unavoidable, with a broken replicator and a ruined shuttle. But there were additional symptoms to worry about: Riker's skin was cold and slick with sweat, his teeth chattering; he routinely pitched sideways on the mattress, hanging his head over the side of the biobed with his lips stretched open in a dry, helpless retch. On his neck, bruised and infected, there was the telltale irritation of hypospray abuse. The skin there had turned purple and green, gaping open at the pore-like holes where unknown medication had been administered.

When the patient had stabilized and the extraneous medics had gone away, silence crept in. Peaceful, strained, with the smell of infection and vomit hanging in the air. Beverly stayed behind, a laser regenerator pinched between her thumb and forefinger. She ran it over the ruined skin on Riker's neck without a word.

Her professional mask didn't crack, exactly. Her expression stayed calm and cool, the empathetic but almost-bored facade that all the best doctors learned when they were young. It was the kind of face that said, *"Yes, it hurts, but that's okay — it's really nothing to worry about."* But behind Beverly, where the patient couldn't see, her back muscles were so tight that her shoulder blades showed through her lab coat. Donovan eyed that note of tension and then grabbed a rag, easing into Beverly's peripheral vision so he could mop up the mess of stomach acid and saliva on the sickbay floor.

When he stood up again, she had that shoulder tension under control. Perfectly relaxed now — or so it seemed — Beverly aimed her beam at the knot of infected flesh on Riker's throat. Cloudy blue eyes followed her, studying her face.

"You're awake, Will?" she asked.

No response. Donovan could see the line of concern between Beverly's eyebrows, but she masked it well, keeping her voice light and teasing.

"Deanna will be glad you shaved your beard," she said, almost begging for a reaction. When Riker neither smiled nor responded, she ran a gentle finger over his healed hypospray wound and said, "You want to tell me how you got this?"

"You know me," Riker said.

"Yes?" said Beverly, not understanding. "I thought I did. But the Will Riker I know doesn't take dryhaxalyn. What happened down there, Will?"

The patient's face remained closed-off. For Donovan, a stranger, the meaning of those words, "You know me," was instantly clear. He stepped forward, easing Beverly out of Riker's line of sight.

"We haven't met," he said, presenting his hand. Riker shook it, his grip weak and his skin clammy. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Donovan of the U.S.S. Enterprise."

There was no flicker of recognition in Riker's eyes. He let his hand fall.

"Federation," he said. "Am I a prisoner, then?"

Beverly stirred at Donovan's side. He put his hand on hers, below the biobed, out of Riker's line of sight — a silent command to stay silent.

"Why would you be a prisoner?" he asked.

A lazy smile spread over Riker's face. With no answer forthcoming, Donovan scanned down Riker's naked body. Whip scars curled around his shoulders and over his ribs, where the lash had bitten into him and left a permanent mark. But it wasn't just scars that branded him as different. On his wrist, a small black insignia stood out against the pale skin.

"A Ferengi design?" Donovan asked, turning Riker's hand over.

He closed his fingers into a loose fist. "Yes," he said.

"You didn't have that tattoo when you left," Beverly cut in.

"Left?" He studied her distantly, without emotion. Donovan traced a finger over the Ferengi tattoo design — a simple hammer, a symbol of some sort — but he'd barely made it around the deadly-looking curve of the hammer head when Riker jerked his hand away. Absently, Donovan said to Beverly,

"What are the symptoms of long-term dryhaxalyn abuse?"

"Long-term?" She pursed her lips. She wanted to argue with him — Donovan could sense it — the same way Worf refused to believe that Commander Riker would steal drugs from the Ferengi. But there was a new, hard edge in her eyes that told Donovan she'd already accepted the truth. "Heart arrhythmia and high blood pressure. Impotence." Riker's face remained expressionless. "Memory loss," Beverly admitted.

"Is it permanent?"

Riker's eyes had lost focus. He turned his head away, arms crossed loosely over his scarred chest. One palm rested over a thick, silver scar on his abdomen, where someone must have dug a curved blade into his flesh.

"It could be," said Beverly quietly. "But just going through withdrawal could lift the brain fog. Commander—"

"Call me Lieutenant Commander," said Donovan in a soft voice, pleading with her with his eyes.

She understood. "Lieutenant Commander, dryhaxalyn has been prohibited in Federation space for more than a century. Most medical research conducted on this subject is carried through by out-of-the-way rehab programs on non-Federation worlds. The gap in research communication can be immense."

He nodded. A glance at Riker showed him — apparently — asleep, but his shoulders were tense, his biceps standing out, his skin still covered in a sheen of fresh sweat.

"Tell him who he is," Donovan suggested.

"I had planned to," said Beverly a bit dryly. She edged past Donovan, outwardly smiling. But when she smoothed Riker's hair back, as Riker unconsciously flinched at her touch, there was a hint of pain in her eyes. "I've got him from here, Lieutenant Commander," she said. "You may go."

"Crusher to Donovan."

Donovan jerked awake, sucking in his first deep breath in over an hour. There was a crease on his cheek from where he'd fallen asleep against his desk, and he looked first one way, then the other, trying to determine where Crusher's voice was coming from. His uniform tunic lay draped over the foot of his unused bed, and he took his time unfolding it and searching for the combadge. "Donovan here," he said calmly, palming a layer of sweat off the back of his neck.

"Can you come to sickbay, Lieutenant Commander?"

"An emergency?" Donovan asked.

"The opposite." She hesitated. "I'm clearing Commander Riker. To return to his quarters at least."

Donovan assessed this, his eyes flickering. It had been a long two weeks since he and Worf found Riker on Ipsand. He'd spent most of that time struggling to keep the bridge crew focused — not an easy task when they had little to work on and a long-lost first officer to welcome back. And of course, he'd been observing Picard, picking his brain, trying to determine his own spot on this ship. The uncertainty was unsettling. He was fairly sure he wouldn't be summarily kicked off at the next space station. That wasn't the Enterprise's style. But...

"Why are you telling me?" he asked. "I don't imagine it's because of my rank."

A pause. "No," Crusher admitted. "He asked for you."

Donovan sat up slowly. "He asked for me?" No answer. "And why is that?"

He listened closely to the quiet warble of static. There were fluctuations that he thought indicated movement. Like she was angling away from a crowd of eavesdropping medics — or from Riker himself.

"You know," Beverly said finally, voice low and packed with meaning, "he's had a lot of visitors since he checked in."

Donovan stayed silent. He'd seen the visitor's log. And he'd known since his first cold, stiff welcome here that Riker had a lot of friends.

"They all remember him," Beverly said. "We all remember him as Will Riker. Commander of the Enterprise. His memory is intact — mostly, now — but for the past fortnight he's had a steady stream of visitors telling him how they used to watch him play trombone in Ten-Forward, or how he helped them fill out paperwork for a promotion, or..."

Donovan had caught Counselor Troi crying once — hidden off a main corridor, tucked into a Jeffries Tube when she was supposed to be on the bridge. And just this morning, after he and Picard shared a cup of tea, he'd listened to the captain stumble over "Number One" again before settling on Donovan's first name. The only time he'd used it in over a year.

He took a slow, deep breath.

"You don't remember him," Beverly said carefully. "The way he was. You have no expectations."

"No. And I took his position, of course. I imagine that factors into it."

"He wants to speak to you," said Beverly, her voice firm. She ignored the probe about rank. If she knew how Riker felt about Donovan, she wasn't talking.

"I'll be there," Donovan said.

The man waiting in sickbay was closer — *much* closer — to the personnel photo still pinned to his file. He was in the head when Donovan entered, but the door was open, so he could see Riker bent over the sink, vigorously washing red-knuckled hands with a hospital soap so dry and antiseptic that it might just crack his skin. Donovan stayed back, hovering just outside Riker's peripheral vision (he hoped). Now, the man's infamous height was apparent — at least as tall as Worf, perhaps a touch taller — and a healthier weight now, after two weeks in

sickbay. His pale skin had turned ruddy, his beard was growing in, his too-long hair was clean and soft, not quite so damaged as Donovan had assumed.

But there were still bags under his eyes.

“I remember you,” Riker called from the bathroom. He had a good voice, Donovan decided at once. Boisterous, cheerful. The kind of voice that set ensigns at ease. “I halfway-thought you were going to arrest me.”

He scrubbed the water off his hands and turned to face Donovan. One look at his smile and Donovan understood the appeal without liking it. If Riker were healthy, that smile would probably win Donovan over in a heartbeat. But right now, impish and infectious though it was, it struck him as a little forced.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” he asked.

Riker’s smile dropped in an instant. He blinked at Donovan — the word ‘sir’ — and then recovered. Hands in his pockets, shoulders down, he said, “I thought you could show me where my quarters are.”

Donovan nodded. “Dr. Crusher told me you’d been cleared.”

“In a manner of speaking.” He shrugged. “Not cleared for duty. But at least I can get out of these paper pajamas and into...”

He searched the room as if he might find the right words hiding somewhere behind Beverly’s medical equipment. Couldn’t he remember what he used to wear, out of uniform? Or was he the type to never wear civilian clothes at all? Donovan gave Riker a moment to think, but nothing was forthcoming. After an awkward silence, he gestured subtly to the door, just a casual lifting of the index finger.

Riker nodded. He caught up to Donovan in one stride, rubbing the back of his neck. In the hall, where every passing petty officer seemed determined to gawk at Riker, Donovan tried to distract him.

“Dr. Crusher told me you got your memory back,” he said.

“Mostly,” Riker nodded. He half-smiled and amended his statement. “Fully. Just... it doesn’t feel right.”

“No?”

“Not yet.” They walked in silence for a bit. Donovan deliberately slowed his pace, waiting to see if Riker would take the lead by muscle memory. But when he slowed down, Riker faltered. Like he didn’t even know how to get to the turbolift. “As if *God has given me one face, but I make myself another*,” Riker said.

Donovan frowned. “Meaning what, exactly?”

“Meaning ... I guess ... let’s say I spent the last year or so named *John Smith*, with no memory of Will Riker. Now I’ve got those memories back, and I’m supposed to feel like Will Riker.” He shrugged emotionlessly. “Only I still feel like John Smith, just with Will Riker’s memories suddenly dumped inside my brain.” He blinked. “Uh, not that I really *had* a name,” he said. “But not having a name for your new identity doesn’t make it, you know ... I mean, on Tilonus IV, he went through the same thing.”

‘He’, not ‘I’. But he most certainly meant Will Riker when he said that, because Donovan had perused Riker’s file. Tilonus IV was the planet where Riker was knocked unconscious and subjected to a brain probe that turned his memories of the Enterprise into a mere delusion. And Riker talked about all this with a casual grin. It was the casualness of it that chilled Donovan. No name, for an entire year... his sense of self so destroyed that he could talk about it with a smile...

He pushed it out of his head. They’d reached the turbolift and set in a course for Deck Eight before he placed the quote, the one Riker had recited earlier.

“Shakespeare,” Donovan said.

“Hamlet,” Riker agreed.

“I didn’t know you were a reader.” Picard had never mentioned it. Riker just gave a bashful smile.

“I’m influenced by good friends,” he said. His smile faded fast, eyes going distant. Remembering something — someone. When the turbolift doors opened, Riker led the way out, his body guiding him down a route his mind didn’t fully remember. He only stopped when he realized Donovan wasn’t following him. For a moment, standing there in the corridor, he looked lost. A sailor marooned at sea.

“This way,” Donovan said, pointing toward the guest quarters.

“No. That’s where we put the diplomats. Officer country—” Riker started to gesture down the hall, then realized in the middle of the sentence that his old quarters must have been moved. After all, he *wasn’t* an officer anymore, not really. Officially, he was still listed as MIA.

He snapped his mouth shut and nodded.

“They put you in my old room?” he asked, his voice carefully neutral, but beneath his thin pajamas, the tendons in his forearms were sticking out, the shoulders a too-sharp line.

“I suppose they must have,” said Donovan.

Riker gave an uneasy shrug. “Makes sense. You *are* the first officer. You deserve a first officer’s quarters.”

Donovan let the statement breathe. They'd selected a spacious room for Riker, a sort of guest suite usually reserved for visiting officers. Riker stepped inside — faltered — studied the room in a slow turn. No decorations, no personal effects. Riker rubbed his thumb against his forefinger.

"My things?" he asked lightly.

Did he *remember* his things?

"Counselor Troi went through them," Donovan said. "I believe she saved most, if not all, of what she found. I was there when she boxed them up."

"Troi," Riker said. A spark entered his eyes and he grinned at Donovan, a genuine smile this time. "She visited me in sickbay. Deanna!"

"Yes."

"Okay, lead me to her!"

Donovan suspected Riker knew the way. Troi's quarters weren't far, so he kept his pace slow as a snail, letting Riker run ahead and giving himself time to check Troi's schedule on his PADD. No patients right now. Good. Ahead of him, Riker had stopped, studying two identical doors on either side of the hallway. He hesitantly drifted toward the correct one and raised his hand to hit the chime.

The door slid open before he could.

"You set your door to let me in?" Riker called, eyes sparkling.

From inside there was a gasp — a crash of a dropped PADD hitting the floor — and Troi came into view. Donovan expected her to rush to Riker, to hug him. But curiously, she held back.

"Will," she said, and she lapsed into silence. Her dark eyes scanned his face; her fingers hovered centimeters from his cheek, without touching him. She let her hand fall.

For half a second, Riker looked confused; the deliberate decision not to touch him, the reserved greeting... The smile on his face turned hard.

"I heard you kept my things," he said, and his voice didn't quite come out right. The smile fractured a little before he dropped it, unable to maintain the facade. He smoothed a palm over his hospital pajama top, looking more like a man at a funeral now. "I was hoping to find something to wear."

"Of course." Troi backed away from him, but she never really turned around, never let him out of her sight. Inside her quarters, Donovan could see the pile of boxes taking up space in every corner. A polished trombone stood on display, but Riker seemed not to recognize it. He watched expressionlessly as Troi examined the boxes, a little flustered. They were unlabeled, and Donovan couldn't remember which ones they'd shoved clothes into and which held personal effects, so he figured Troi couldn't either. Finally, frustrated, she abandoned the boxes and opened her wardrobe. She cast Riker a glance, hopeful and disbelieving and restrained, like she wanted to run to him, but kept holding herself back.

What did she sense inside him that made her hold herself back?

"Here," Deanna said.

She pulled a sweater from its hanger. Riker took it, a line appearing between his eyebrows. He held the soft material to his nose.

"I think I remember this," he said softly. Then, with a strange, sharp smile: "Smells like you."

Deanna looked like she might cry. It was inconceivable to Donovan that anyone who cared for her could look at her like that and not go to her — not hold her. But Riker didn't. He glanced at the ornate Betazoid mirror hanging on Deanna's wall and deliberately turned his back on it, and he stripped out of his pajama top without a hint of modesty. His scars were on display for the span of a single breath, and then he pulled the sweater over his head.

Donovan glanced at Deanna. Her face had shuttered. There was still standing water in her eyes, but her cheeks had gone cold, the flush of tears dissipating. A ripple of shock tightened the air between them, both of them unnerved by the sudden — almost pointed — display.

"I'll wait outside," Donovan decided, hoping to escape the quickly deteriorating reunion.

"No," said Riker and Troi as one. Troi's voice was desperate; Riker's, disinterested. He crouched before the boxes and tugged them open one by one, examining the contents with a listlessness that seemed to make Troi squirm. Riker pulled out one of his own uniforms, studied it without recognition, and stuffed it back inside. He unearthed an old book, its pages yellowed and fragile, and turned it this way and that without opening. He tossed it aside with careless indifference.

Troi's face shuttered. She picked the book up — not exactly gently, but with a sort of distant numbness that concerned Donovan. She clasped it close to her chest as she backed off. *Ode to Psyche* — Donovan could see the lettering on the cover now. Helplessly, Deanna met his eyes, practically pleading with him.

"Why don't you select some clothes, Commander, and you can go get some rest," Donovan suggested. The building tension was almost unbearable by this point.

With a bored expression, Riker stood. He collected an armful of civilian clothes and bundled them up without any care for the wrinkles. "Alright," he said without looking at Deanna. "I'm done here."

They were halfway out the door when Deanna spoke.

“Will,” she said, voice low and wobbling, “do you remember me?”

He stopped. His face, when he turned, was expressionless. “Of course I remember you,” he said with convincing warmth. He hesitated, held his hand out to her, but he couldn’t hide the reluctance that tensed his shoulders and made his fingers curl. “*Imzadi*,” he said.

Deanna blinked furiously. Her hands tightened over the Keats book until her knuckles turned white.

“I *do* remember you,” Riker insisted, letting his hand fall.

“I know,” Deanna whispered. “But you didn’t, did you? Not until very recently.”

He didn’t answer. Deanna stared at the floor, at Riker’s bare feet. Her chest swelled as she took a deep breath. With a flick of her eyes, she asked Donovan to leave, but all he could do was edge further down the hall and turn away.

“You don’t have to feel ashamed,” he heard Deanna say.

Donovan snuck a glance. The bored expression on Riker’s face had abruptly twisted into outrage, incredulity — like someone had walked in on him while he was on the toilet, and now they wouldn’t leave. His voice, when he spoke, was unrecognizable: dark and firm, laced with malice.

“Get the hell out of my head, Counselor,” he hissed. He glanced around the quarters, at the boxes tucked into every corner, and then tossed his bundle of clothing on the floor in disgust.

“Will!” Deanna cried as he walked away. She raced to the door and stopped there, like she couldn’t follow him. He stalked right past Donovan without seeing him. Fury rolled off him in waves, almost tangible; a bristle that warned other people to stay away. The snarl on his lips was colorless, fixed.

By the time he reached his new quarters, he was trembling too hard to type the access code.

“What about your things?” Deanna called.

Riker stabbed his code into the doorpad and shouted back, “They’re not mine!”

Chapter 3

He'd stayed up all night putting his report into writing, so now he could stand in Picard's office in silence, his eyes on the mementos that made up Picard's starboard wall. The scent of hot replicated tea filled the cabin, the silence broken only by the tap of Picard's fingertips against his PADD as he read the report.

"Counselor Troi and Doctor Crusher will submit their conclusions this afternoon," Picard remarked. "Perhaps you'd like to join us for a round-table discussion."

Donovan ran his finger over the hull of a model starship. The *Stargazer*. He'd run a consulting mission on the *Stargazer* once, under its new captain. "Will Commander Riker be there, sir?" he asked.

Picard reached for his cup. "Do you think that would be fruitful?"

"He is the subject of these reports." Donovan turned to face Picard. "And your friend. Deanna's and Beverly's as well. Having him present might impede our ability to speak freely."

Picard hid a pale smile behind the rim of his cup. "You've already made your decision, then."

"The decision isn't mine to make. To return to active duty, Commander Riker needs three signatures. None of them are my own."

Picard nodded almost absently as he set his cup back down. "And you're certain your opinion isn't..."

"Clouded?" Donovan guessed.

"Influenced," Picard corrected. "By your position on this ship."

"If Commander Riker is returned to active duty, will he be reinstated as first officer?" Donovan asked politely. "Will I be reassigned to a new ship?"

Picard tilted his head to the side, studying Donovan's face. Donovan knew, from long years of practice, that his features gave nothing away.

"Would that be so devastating?" asked Picard finally, mildly. "A year is a long assignment for a man like you, Lieutenant Commander. Have you, perhaps, come to view the *Enterprise* as home?"

Donovan tried, and failed, to suppress a cynical smile. Picard took that as an answer. He gave a gentle nod and returned to his PADD.

"You will not be reassigned unless you request it," he said. "I would like to see Commander Riker resume his duties as first officer, if possible — but the hand-over process will be slow. We can discuss this later, when — if — he resumes light duties."

"Aye, sir," said Donovan softly. He charted the next nine months in his head. There was a research station near Bajor that would be rotating its crew by then. The commanding officer knew Donovan from way back; he'd slide in with no problem and go from there if necessary. But the prospect left a bad taste in his mouth. Too many unresolved issues on Bajor. Too many memories.

"I understand you've been in touch with Dr. Crusher," Picard said. "Am I correct in assuming you've accessed Commander Riker's medical file?"

"I was there for much of the initial medical analysis," Donovan said. "I didn't need to access his file." He turned back to the wall of mementos eyed a shard of alien pottery sealed in a museum display case, the glass laser-etched in the corner with Picard's initials. "The Ferengi tattoo on his wrist is a symbol of love and possession. As an anthropologist, I'd guess it's a brand — a way to mark a particular type of slave. And if you've read Dr. Crusher's report, sir, then you know there was extensive evidence of..." He lowered his head, his cheeks heating a little. "Of torture," he decided to say. Then he pushed past the embarrassment to say it. "Sexual assault. STIs."

"Yes," said Picard almost inaudibly.

By then Donovan's blush had cooled. He could almost hear an old familiar ghost teasing him about it — about his sensitivity to all things love and romance — and the memory set off a near-physical reaction, a determination to regroup, show no emotion, be cold as stone. To Picard he said, a little roughly, "Think of the optics."

Picard's features twitched. He stared at Donovan with dark eyes. "I'll give you the chance to try that again, Commander," he said in a low voice.

Chastised, but not embarrassed, Donovan said, "Think of Riker's *reputation*. We need to assess where he was sold. Who came into contact with him. How fast, and how far, this news will spread." He put up a hand to forestall Picard's temper, but his heart rate kicked up as he did so, warning him that he had plunged into dangerous territory. "I'm not saying this to dissuade you, sir. You want to reinstate him? I want that, too. All I'm saying is we need to prepare for the day this news is used against him. It will be our duty to support and defend him when that happens."

Picard relaxed a little, but the line of his jaw was still tight, hard. "I would like to tell you, Commander, that the officers of Starfleet are above such malicious gossip. Certainly, that we are above allowing it to influence our positions, our fleet politics." He let out a clipped sigh. "But I think we both know better. Thank you for your report."

Donovan nodded. He examined the shard of pottery in its case one last time. In the glass, he could see Picard's reflection studying him.

“You were an archaeologist once, I believe,” Picard said. “Before the conflict on Kallonia?”

Donovan traced the shard’s jagged line with his fingertip. His hand trembled, and he had to clench it into a fist to make it stop.

“Commander?” Picard prompted. When Donovan didn’t answer right away, he said, “You were an archaeologist? I ask only because I have an interest in the field myself.”

“As a hobby,” said Donovan quietly. He forced himself to turn away from the artifact. “It was nothing serious, unfortunately. But yes. I had an interest in the ancient Bajoran settlements on Kallonia and its moons. I joined a dig there, fresh out of school.”

His voice trailed off.

“You were instrumental in helping the Bajorans on Kallonia regain their independence,” Picard remarked. Donovan hid his clenched fists behind his back.

“I used to think so,” he agreed, his voice light. “I’m not so sure of that anymore.” His fixed smile became a little more natural. “But it won me a Starfleet commission.”

Picard’s eyes drifted down to Donovan’s combadge. He didn’t smile. “Yes,” he said gently. “That it did. Donovan—”

But the gentleness in his voice had Donovan’s nerves jangling and his tongue fuzzy with the intense need for a drink.

“May I be dismissed, sir?” he interrupted. “It’s almost time for my shift.”

Picard hesitated. He glanced over Donovan’s shoulder at the shard of pottery — and something in his gaze softened, and finally, mercifully, he nodded his head. “Dismissed, Commander.”

Donovan bounced on his heels, a cheeky gesture that didn’t fit his personality at all, and one he instantly regretted. By the time he left, his face was burning again, and that voice was back: Luvo, young and Bajoran, lanky and smiling, his fingers caressing Donovan’s smooth cheek.

So pale, he’d whispered. And you blush so easily.

Donovan ducked into the nearest supply closet and waited for the voice to fade away.

Chapter 4

Counselor Troi walked onto the bridge with a sort of slow, conspicuous dignity that suggested she'd been crying. She met Donovan's eyes only briefly — cool gaze, eyebrows arched. A reminder to keep his mouth shut about what he'd seen when he took Riker to her room.

Not that Donovan had anyone to tell. He nodded to her in greeting from his position in the command chair, and then turned to the helm, where the sight of Ro's Bajoran earring made his stomach twist.

"Sensors?" he asked, fighting for composure.

Data tapped his screen. "Sensors show no life signs and no breathable atmosphere, sir."

Donovan sat back with a sigh. "Take us out, then, Ensign Ro. On to the next one."

He passed Troi a handheld PADD with all the info on their latest star system pulled up. The planets had looked hopeful on long-range scans, but up close, the would-be life signs had all turned out to be nothing but radiation interference. Yet again. It had been weeks since their cartography mission brought them to an inhabited planet, and Donovan could only hope one of these unlikely little bodies would turn out to be a suitable candidate for terraforming. That way, the bridge crew would stop feeling like their time had been wasted on busywork. He kept an eye on the viewport and tried to stay sharp as they surveyed the next planet.

"Sensors show no life signs and no breathable atmosphere, sir," said Data again, in exactly the same tone. Donovan made sure not to sigh this time, just to break the pattern.

"Very well. Ensign, take us out. Mister Data, as we approach the next planet, I'd like you to—"

Behind Donovan, the turbolift doors hissed open, igniting the fight-or-flight instincts of everyone on the bridge. The shift roster was full; there shouldn't be anyone coming in now unless it was an emergency. But a civilian staggered out onto the bridge and froze, as if he didn't know where he was. It took Donovan a moment to piece the data together and realize who was in front of him: nightclothes, pale skin, gaunt frame, blue eyes.

Riker.

"Commander—" Donovan said as he got to his feet, but Riker had acclimated himself by then, and he made a beeline straight toward the computer. He waved the ensign there out of his way. At first he just studied the controls, his eyebrows furrowed. Then he remembered how to work them so fast that by the time Donovan got to him, he'd already accessed files ten encryption layers deep.

"Commander," Donovan said in a low voice, "you—" *are not authorized to use the bridge computer.* "—are not in uniform."

Riker ignored him. He scanned the files on the screen and reached forward to tap on one, but Donovan caught his arm. Before he could say anything, Riker jerked away, using their considerable size difference to shove Donovan aside. He approached the helm. His jaw was tight, his shoulders were back ... and there was a gleam of sweat in his hair, lit up by the soft white lights overhead.

"Data, with me," he said, gripping the railing tight. If he'd ordered anyone else, they wouldn't have moved, Donovan knew — because they were too shocked by Riker's appearance to even speak. But Data jumped to his feet and loped toward Riker — and when Riker swayed, Data supported him on one side even as Donovan hurried forward and supported him on the other.

"Data, your place is on the bridge," said Donovan, hauling Riker upright. Concern made his voice come out sharp. On the other side, Data got Riker stabilized and stepped away, his eyebrows furrowed.

"Commander Riker has requested my assistance," said Data.

"I didn't give you permission to leave," Donovan pressed. He checked Riker's eyes to see if he was even lucid, or if this was some sort of feverish sleepwalking. "If you state your purpose, perhaps I—"

"I need your assistance with a research project," said Riker to Data as if Donovan hadn't spoken. As if he hadn't almost fallen where he stood. "We can do this in my quarters, Data. Come on."

He swept his sweat-soaked hair back from his forehead and headed toward the turbolift — and the only thing he did to persuade Data was lightly tap his arm, but Data obeyed. Donovan watched in helpless disbelief as his Science Officer abandoned the bridge. He got a glimpse of them in the turbolift — Riker's skin almost as pale as Data's, and his hands shaking violently — and then the doors closed.

The bridge was silent. Donovan stared at the closed doors for a moment; he felt out-of-body, like he was floating. He cataloged the pale faces and trembling hands around him without emotion. How many of them had last seen Riker over a year ago, tall and fit and smiling? A rotten way to reintroduce him, Donovan thought, but nothing he could do about it now, and that helplessness chafed at him more than anything else. Slowly, he turned to face the helm and saw Ro watching him, a sharp smile curling her lips. She made no effort to hide it when Donovan looked at her. She just raised her chin defiantly and let the smile settle into a smirk.

"Something to say, Ensign?" asked Donovan levelly.

"No," said Ensign Ro with a lilt to her voice. She turned back to the helm as if nothing had happened. As Donovan took his seat, he caught Troi staring at him too, with an entirely different expression: guilty, somewhat sick.

"I have to report this," Donovan said to her, his voice almost a whisper. He tried to convey just how apologetic he was — and just how serious

an incident this was — but he couldn't tell if it got through. Troi pursed her lips and nodded, but at the helm, Ensign Ro said, in a loud, clear voice:

“Why?”

“Ensign,” Troi cautioned.

Ro turned in her seat. “You must have an awfully low opinion of us if you think something like that would impact our ability to follow orders,” she said, her voice close to a sneer. “So Riker *undermined your authority* — is that what you were planning to say? Surely the Killer of Kallonia can handle his authority being *undermined*.”

She said that last with a smile, but it was the type of smile that could cut through flesh. Donovan met her eyes, unimpressed.

“Dismissed, Ensign,” said Donovan. His voice came out flat and measured. Convincing. A few of the officers sent Ro significant looks as she left, but Troi was staring straight at Donovan, her eyebrows furrowed. No doubt she could sense his pounding heart, his sweaty palms, the inner turmoil clawing at his guts. No one else could see anything amiss, but an empath...

Donovan adjusted his combadge with a sigh. The helm and science station had been manned, quietly, by ensigns who were trying awfully hard not to catch his eye. As he stood he felt for the first time the tension that had been building among his fellow officers ever since Data obeyed Riker's orders over his. He glanced around at them, memorizing in one brief look the subtle expressions, the discomfort that hung over them like a shroud. Then, with a quiet, casual dignity, he touched Troi on the shoulder.

“You have the conn,” he said.

This museum didn't exist. Not anymore. Shortly after Donovan left Kallonia, it was bombed to pieces. But here, in the holosuite...

Soft light illuminated the artifacts on display. In the East Wing, where Donovan and Picard now stood, many of the artifacts came from the same dig where Donovan first met his Bajoran friend Luvo. These were the artifacts he remembered best, so there were no empty spots in the display case. He'd touched many of these artifacts himself, brushed the dirt from each surface, lifted them gently from their place in the earth and helped Luvo clean them in the shade of their tent. But in the other wings, the display cases were almost deserted. Here and there a single artifact remained, preserved by Donovan's memory: a case of iridescent insects he and Luvo had admired; a series of sketches by an old Bajoran master, notable because on other planets, only his paintwork was known. But everything else — all those little relics that Donovan couldn't remember — were lost to time.

“Perhaps you'd better tell me what happened,” Picard said.

Donovan turned away from the display case. He'd asked to meet Picard here, ostensibly to indulge their mutual love for archaeology. In reality, it was to give himself some breathing room, ensuring he kept his body under tight control while he explained. Easier to do that here, where he felt comfortable, rather than Picard's ready room. He called up the memory of the incident — Data disappearing into the turbolift, Ro's smug smile — and bit back a sigh.

“There was an incident on the bridge,” he said. “Commander Riker...”

He saw again the rumpled nightclothes hanging off Riker's frame. The drops of sweat glistening in his hair. The stumble.

Donovan abruptly changed tracks.

“*This* was the capital museum on Kallonia,” he explained with a hint of pride. The control panel for the display lit up at his touch; he'd programmed the holosuite to give him access to whatever artifacts he desired. “My team contributed to these displays through our archaeological digs ... before the war. I discovered this one myself.”

Picard leaned closer, his eyes narrowed. He watched as Donovan removed a slab of etched stone and held it in both hands.

“I saw a lot of trauma during that war,” said Donovan softly, his expression darkening a bit. “Before and after, too. The Bajorans have been oppressed for centuries...”

“I am...” Picard searched for the right word, his voice grave. “...*familiar* with their struggles. Ensign Ro...”

He trailed off. Donovan understood, anyway. He turned the slab of stone over and showed Picard the other side. The front face, the one on display, depicted a family at dinner. The other side, hidden from visitors, showed the father speared by his own weapon, the family gone.

“I worked with the Prophet of a local sect,” Donovan said. “The ethnic majority on Kallonia. In the Prophet's ranks, I met hundreds of men who had been — in some way — tortured by Cardassians, either physically—” He thought of Luvo (just a boy, really, even younger than Donovan, and so eager to learn from someone in Starfleet, to fantasize about what he'd go through if he ever joined the Academy, if he graduated from being the dig site's waterboy and left Kallonia, saw the stars...) and Donovan closed his eyes, his grip tightening on the stone slab, his breath quickening. “—or emotionally, *socially* tortured, by breaking apart their communities, killing their children and wives.”

He forced himself to study the etching, as if looking for answers. His thumb traced over the dead man's outstretched hand. It was crude — Luvo had believed it to be an eyewitness etching, a memorial stone of sorts left behind by one of the children depicted on the other side. Donovan had disagreed; he didn't believe there were any children left.

“*Men* who are traumatized,” said Donovan softly, pausing. “...especially warriors ... they question authority. They disobey the people over them. They get defiant.” He shrugged minutely, a barely-noticeable shift of his shoulders. “That's just how it is. Maybe in some way it helps. It allows them to reestablish their position in society, their rank. It might not be pleasant for everyone around them, at times, but I think...” He

corrected himself. “I *know* it’s necessary.”

Picard moved a little closer, his voice low. “What happened on the bridge, Commander?”

Donovan huffed a humorless laugh. “Nothing and everything, sir. That’s the issue. A man who’s been through what Riker’s been through — and, well, a man with his record, on top of that — my instinct is to say that a little insubordination is to be expected. That we should let it slide.” He ground his thumbnail against the stone grooves, and when he spoke again, his voice came out haltingly, wrenched from his throat one word at a time. “In fact, I still think that. The issue is it wasn’t just him. And trust me, I know too well that it doesn’t look good for an outsider such as myself to pull old-timers up for disrespect. When you’re an outsider, you have to take the disrespect with a smile, or you’ll never be accepted. I learned that lesson too well on Kallonia. There was a time when—”

He saw the horses again. Always, he called those native creatures *horses*, because it made Luvo laugh. But when the charge on Juwal went wrong, when the horses fell and died, that little joke bit Donovan in the ass. He couldn’t remember the local word for these beasts, and all he could do was gesture helplessly, stuttering in a mix of English and dialectical Bajoran as he tried to rectify his own stupid mistake, the mistake that landed him here with slick animal death reeking in the air, in the wet earth clinging to his cuffs, and Bajoran blood dripping from his hands—

“*Donovan*,” Picard snapped.

The stone slab slipped from Donovan’s hands. He blinked down at it, shattered in pieces on the floor. His breath came out in shallow gasps.

“Computer,” he said, “revert to starting parameters.”

The stone slab disappeared. It popped back into existence, whole and unharmed, behind the display glass.

“I don’t need to hear about Kallonia,” said Picard, softer now. “I’ve read the reports, Commander. Whatever happened there does *not* need to be repeated between us.”

Donovan managed a nod. Internally, he was rebuilding his emotional wall. Re-filing the errant memories. He barely heard Picard’s voice as he worked: Luvo, Kallonia, all of it folded and tucked away...

“And you are *not* an outsider on this ship,” Picard was saying. “You are my first officer, my second-in-command, and my crew will treat you as such. Understood?”

“Understood,” Donovan murmured.

“Now tell me what happened on my bridge.”

Donovan told him the whole story, his heart pounding, but his voice calm. During the retelling, Picard closed in on himself. He positioned one hand over his lips, hiding his mouth — and his eyes became shuttered, unreadable.

“Your assessment?” he asked when Donovan was done.

Donovan warred with himself. Mentally, he repeated all over again the pros and cons of reporting, saw himself after the Battle of Jawal, the way he menaced the admiral who’d come to visit, nearly lost his rank, his position, his head. He swallowed hard.

“I think ... if possible, sir, I think we should let it go,” he said reluctantly. “I think we should treat it as an anomaly — uncharacteristic of Commander Riker. Because, if I’m not mistaken, sir, it *is* uncharacteristic. No?”

Picard’s eyes flashed. “You are telling me what you think I wish to hear.”

“No, sir. I’m taking Commander Riker’s unique circumstances into account.” And trying not to think about his own behavior back on Kallonia, all the times he exploded on superior officers, or weathered explosions on his own.

The past was the past. His behavior back on Kallonia, the insubordination, the abuse. It had no place here. It was *irrelevant* .

“Then, Commander Data and Ensign Ro?” Picard prompted.

“I’ll defer to your judgment, sir.”

“I think not.” Picard folded his hands behind his back, shoulders squared. He glanced at the stone slab in its display case. “*You* will handle them, Commander, because it is *you* they disrespected. I expect a report in the morning, with the details of your reprimand and whatever punishment you see suitable.”

“Sir, Ensign Ro — perhaps it would be better if someone else—” The glimmer of her earpiece in the soft bridge lights. Internal chaos threatened to break loose, once again. Donovan doubled down his focus.

“*You* will handle it, Commander.” There was fire in Picard’s eyes. But a sad smile touched his lips. “You have my sympathies. I know Ensign Ro can be a handful.”

I know she holds you responsible for Kallonia, was what he meant. To act as if Donovan were just shirking a mildly unpleasant task ... clearly it was meant to be a kindness, but a seed of helpless resentment burned in Donovan’s chest. He grunted and tried to keep his displeasure off his face. He worked his features into a more acceptable mask, determined to reflect a calmer demeanor, one that didn’t mirror how he really felt. With control regained once more, he turned his attention back to Picard ... and knew at once that Picard had seen the whole struggle. It was there in the thin, somber line of his lips, the wary hint of softness in his eyes. But all Picard said was:

“I do agree it’s concerning.” His gaze went distant. He studied the stone slab. His fingertips trailed against the glass, but unlike Donovan, he didn’t open the case to touch it. “May I offer you some advice?” he asked.

“Of course, sir.”

“Speak to Data,” Picard said. “Find out what Commander Riker ordered him to do.”

He met Donovan’s eyes and let the full weight of his gaze rest between them.

“Get a full report,” he said.

Chapter 5

There was a child crying in sickbay.

“Her name is Emily,” Crusher explained with a mild eyeroll. “Her father is more upset than she is. It’s just a cut on the forehead. But you know how it is — when the parent gets hysterical, the child does, too.”

Riker clenched his jaw tight and kept his eyes forward. He seemed determined to ignore everything around him, including Beverly — but when Emily wailed again, from the other room, Riker clutched at his own trouser legs so tight his knuckles blanched.

“Easy,” Crusher chided. “You don’t want to be grounded just for high blood pressure, do you?”

Riker made an effort to relax — his hands, at least, if nothing else. Shoulders still tense, he allowed Crusher to run the scanner over his body from head to toe. His eyes darted sideways, toward the door that kept Emily and her screaming at bay.

Crusher studied her scanner. Her face was a little too blank to be casual. “I’d like to perform a routine blood test,” she said mildly.

Riker’s head snapped around. “What for?”

“To test your blood,” said Crusher, deliberately bland. Donovan guessed that, a year or so ago, this type of comment — this type of tone — might have elicited a smile. But now Riker just stared back at Crusher. Reluctantly, he proffered his index finger, and didn’t wince when Crusher pricked the pad.

Blood welled up in a bright, unbroken bead. Crusher’s needle siphoned it away, and she knit the minor wound back together one-handed, with a blind sweep of her regenerator.

“That kid is still crying,” Riker said, his voice tight.

“Well, she’s hurt pretty badly, for a four-year-old. In the old days, she’d need stitches,” Crusher said, eyes on her med-reader. “Ogawa’s got her resting with an orange slice on her head.”

Some of Riker’s tension softened, turning into confusion instead. “An orange slice?”

Both Donovan and Crusher stared at him. It was Donovan who recovered first.

“Slang,” he said. “It’s a regenerator for deep wounds. Brightly colored, like an orange slice.”

Riker waved him off halfway through the sentence. “Right, I remember now. I—” He bit back whatever excuse he was going to make with a shake of the head. “I wish I’d had one of those last month,” he said instead, then seemed to realize this was even worse than an excuse. Weariness descended over him and clung to his shoulders. He gestured at Crusher’s med-reader. “What’s it say, Doc? Am I cleared?”

They both pretended not to hear the shy hint of hope in his voice.

“Not quite,” Crusher hesitated. She turned the med-reader so Riker could see it. “Physically, you’re almost fine. But I can’t clear you, even for limited light duty, until we take care of this.”

Riker’s face had shuttered as he read the screen. Crusher gave him another moment to read it, but it was clear his eyes weren’t moving anymore. She swung the screen around for Donovan instead.

“What am I looking at?” he asked softly, tracing the lines of medical jargon with one finger.

“He’s...” Crusher glanced apologetically at Riker, but he’d gone deep inside himself, too deep to see her expression. “He’s still dryhaxalyn-dependent. I’d estimate he only has seventy-two hours, maximum, before he goes into withdrawal.”

Riker slid off the examination table and wandered away. Donovan kept a sharp eye on him, but all Riker did was go to the door and peek through the window at Emily, whose wailing had turned into a quiet, hiccuping sob.

“I’ll have to report this to the captain,” Crusher whispered.

Donovan dug his fingernails into his palm. He resisted the urge to comfort her — to pat her on the shoulder. *Something*. Instead, he crossed the room to Riker, who was still staring through the window. Riker had wrapped his arms around his stomach, almost like giving himself a hug. The cool sickbay air crept up his sleeves and raised the gooseflesh on his arms. Or at least, that was what Donovan blamed Riker’s shivering on — cold air, nothing more.

“I’ll walk you home,” he said quietly.

Riker nodded, but he didn’t move. Through the window, Nurse Ogawa had removed the orange slice and was gently wiping the blood out of Emily’s blonde hair.

“There now,” Ogawa said, voice muffled by the door. “That’s not so bad, is it?”

Emily sat up with a sniffle. She passed a palm over her now-healed forehead, where all traces of the deep gash had faded away. Her eyes tracked to the door, to the hollowed-out man watching her on the other side.

She burst into tears again, and Riker turned to Donovan with a pale smile.

“Yeah,” he said a little unsteadily. “Walk me home.”

“Will—” said Crusher, her voice full of emotion as he walked past. She reached for his hand, their fingers hooking together just briefly, almost accidentally. Then Riker jerked his hand out of her grasp. He stumbled into Donovan, pale and trembling.

“Don’t,” he said.

“Alright,” Donovan cut in, tugging lightly on Riker’s arm. Riker jerked away from him, too, this time unbalancing so hard that he sat heavily on the examination table.

“Don’t touch me,” he said, but it came out in a stammer: three helpless ‘don’t’s before he managed to say ‘touch me’. Crusher’s lips parted, but instead of speaking, she turned sharply away and studied her medscanner, her hair falling forward to hide her face. Donovan folded his hands behind his back.

“No touching, sir,” he said with stiff professionalism. Riker leaned forward, dry-washing his face with both hands. When he sat up, his eyes were watery, but the only emotion on his face was weariness.

“I’m sorry, Beverly,” he said almost inaudibly. To Donovan, before Crusher could answer, he just said, “Let’s go.”

Now that was interesting. Would he apologize to Donovan, too? Not about today — about the bridge. Donovan wondered about it idly as they wound through the halls. Lower-ranking officers and enlisted crewmen passed by, all of them doing their best not to stare at Commander Riker. Every now and then, as if marshaling his efforts, Riker would meet their eyes and offer them a grin. But on average, after managing a smile, it took him seven more crewmen before he could do it again.

Donovan glanced sideways, at Riker, and saw Lovu. He glanced sideways, at Riker, and saw himself after the Battle of Jawal. This was different, of course. This was *worse*. But he tried to imagine Jawal without the respect of his colleagues, without the friendships he’d made (and ruined) in the aftermath. And he couldn’t imagine it. He could see Riker doing the same; insulting Deanna, snapping at Beverly, ignoring Captain Picard.

He took a deep breath as they approached Riker’s quarters.

“I knew your father,” he said.

Riker typed in his access code without glancing up.

“Kyle,” Donovan said.

“I know his name.”

Donovan smiled a little, despite himself. Riker glanced over at him, hostile, then softened a little. “You knew him how?” he asked. Then, without emotion, “Knew? Past-tense? Is he dead?”

“No! Not at all, not to my knowledge.” Donovan hesitated on the threshold as Riker stepped inside. “Do you mean you haven’t contacted him?”

Riker shrugged. He headed for the replicator and tapped his palm against the screen. Then he hesitated. His eyes slid, subtle and slow, to Donovan.

He’d meant to replicate something — maybe alcohol, maybe something else — and he didn’t want Donovan to see. Delicately, Donovan turned away. Some of Riker’s belongings had ended up in these new quarters despite his less-than-stellar reunion with Troi. The trombone rested on Riker’s dresser, a smear of fingerprints on its polished slide. Unpacked boxes had been pushed against the wall.

“I guess I *should* contact him,” said Riker tonelessly. Something clattered out of the replicator and into the tray. There was a suck of air, a click of plastic, a rustle of Riker’s sleeve. Donovan sneaked a peek and saw Riker applying a painkilling patch to his inner arm. “But I’m sure someone else has taken care of it.”

“He’ll want to hear from *you*, won’t he?” Donovan said. He waited until Riker tugged his sleeve back down, and then he turned around fully. “He spoke of you often.”

“Oh?” said Riker, voice flat.

“He was proud of you.”

In Riker’s left hand, he held the discarded packaging from the painkiller patch. He rubbed it between two fingers, letting the edge catch on a callus. Then he tossed it into the reclamationator without a backward glance.

“How exactly did you meet my father?” Riker asked.

Donovan hesitated. “We were both stationed on Bajora Prime for a while, during my summer program, junior year. Our paths crossed more than once.”

“He was a consultant there?”

“Yes. And he didn’t care much for all those cadet archaeologists hanging around.” Donovan wasn’t sure how much to add. He took a risk. “He

compared us to you. Often. I suppose all of us knew your name without ever meeting you. This was before my time on Kallonia, so—”

“You don’t need to repeat that to me,” said Riker softly. He made a dismissive gesture that didn’t match his gentle tone at all. “I’ve heard.”

“Thank you,” Donovan said. He shifted his feet. Guinan and Deanna always acted the same way when he brought up Kallonia — or when someone else did. But he was far more accustomed to people like Picard (brusque and jarring, bringing up those old battles like they didn’t still sting) or Ro (sneering, eyes flashing, a living reminder of all the children he’d failed to save, directly killed). Donovan swallowed against a tight throat.

“What did he say about me?” asked Riker.

Donovan assessed him. Uncomfortable with the subject, but willing to pursue it. Not out of his own curiosity — his eyes were too flat for curiosity. Maybe just to distract Donovan from the painkiller. Or from his own memories. Donovan decided to lean into it.

“He told me you started Parrises Squares at age seven,” said Donovan lightly. “And anbo-jytsu at age eight. That you took your first solo flight at age eleven and you graduated eighth in your class at the Academy. That you set out on your own before you even hit high school. He made us all feel quite sheltered and inadequate, I remember.”

Riker’s eyes swiveled to the left, as if checking his memory. Donovan had seen Data do the same thing. “That’s all correct,” said Riker. “And he was my sparring partner for anbo-jytsu, most of the time. Beat the hell out of me.”

“He didn’t mention that,” Donovan said, allowing himself a smile.

“I guess he wouldn’t.” Riker scratched at his inner arm, remembered the patch, and let his hand fall. “Set out on my own, huh? Interesting way to phrase it.” He crossed to his subspace comm, a little dusty, like he hadn’t touched it once since he was rescued. “You think he remembers you? From Bajora Prime?”

“I’m sure of it. He took a particular disliking to me,” said Donovan with a half-smile.

Riker was silent for a long time. “He can get that way,” he said finally. “Around children.” He shrugged. “Anyone younger than him, really.”

“It’s fine.” Donovan took a breath, feeling like he’d misstepped, been too candid. “He’s your father. He’d want you to call.”

Riker hesitated. His fingers hovered over the contact list. “Then let’s see if he picks up,” he said. He tapped Kyle’s name and waited, watching the soothing pulse of the subspace comm. The longer it chimed, unanswered, the more Donovan wished he’d bitten the bullet and just talked to Riker about the incident on the bridge instead. A minute ticked by — then two — before Riker gently tapped the screen again and ended the call.

“It’s fine,” Riker said with a shrug. He gave Donovan a brittle smile, eyes sparkling with a sharp, bitter mirth that cut Donovan to the quick. “I don’t really know him, anyway.”

Dryhaxalyn dependence. Donovan paced around the empty table in Picard’s ready room, one hand rubbing the short hairs at the back of his neck. That would explain the painkillers. Did Beverly know he was taking them? She must; they would show up on his scan; she was just sensitive enough not to mention it in front of Donovan. She couldn’t have known that Riker himself would let Donovan know.

Donovan heaved a sigh. The painkillers were a good thing, most likely. They would alleviate the symptoms of withdrawal — at least for a while. As he paced, he called up the controls on Riker’s replicator and saw, with a short breath of relief, that Beverly had already placed a med-hold on his machine. He was in no danger of overdosing, then. Donovan banished the results, wished he’d memorized them, called them up again—

The door slid open. Data stepped inside, head cocked.

“Commander,” Donovan greeted. “Thank you for meeting with me.”

“It is no trouble.”

Donovan gestured for Data to sit. As they circled each other, Data said,

“I have noticed humans often neglect the ‘lieutenant’ in ‘lieutenant commander’, presumably as a show of respect.”

His lilting speech always made it sound like he had more to say. Donovan waited a beat, then nodded. “It is considered respectful,” he said. “The same way we drop the ‘junior grade’ in ‘lieutenant junior grade’. Would you prefer I call you ‘Lieutenant Commander’, then?”

“In most cases, I have no preference,” Data said mildly. “However, over the course of the last forty-eight hours, I have come to reconsider.”

“Because of Commander Riker?” Donovan guessed.

Data paused, pursing his lips. “There is only one commander on the Enterprise,” he said, which was as close to a ‘yes’ as Donovan figured he would get.

“Are you telling me you’d like to call me Lieutenant Commander from now on?” Donovan asked.

“If it is permissible.”

“Of course it’s permissible, Data,” said Donovan softly. “It’s my rank. But you know, you can call any of us by name, too, if you prefer.”

"I am aware, sir." Data sat up a little straighter. "Commander Riker has made that same offer to me several times over the past seven years."

"Maybe you should take him up on it." Donovan thought back to his time in Riker's quarters — the failed phone call to his father — the botched reunion with Troi. "Many humans reserve first names for their friends. You call Mr. La Forge by his first name, don't you?"

Data inclined his head. A shadow crossed his face.

"What is it?" Donovan asked.

Data hesitated. "I have, in fact, called Commander Riker by his first name," he said. "Quite recently, sir."

"How recently?"

Data's golden irises shifted at a rapid pace as he calculated the time. "Ten hours, forty-three minutes, sixteen seconds ago, sir."

Donovan recognized the time at once. "You mean when he ordered you off the bridge."

"Shortly afterward, sir. As you said, I believed the usage of Commander Riker's given name might put him at ease."

"But that didn't happen?"

Data's lips parted. He rethought whatever he was going to say and closed his mouth. A line appeared between his eyebrows.

"Data?" Donovan prompted.

Data shook his head. "I apologize, Lieutenant Commander."

"You can't tell me?" Donovan asked.

"I believe it would be optimal to refer to Commander Riker by his rank, sir," Data said. That was probably the closest thing to an answer Donovan was going to get. He nodded his understanding. He let the silence breathe for a moment, and then, in a gentle tone, he said,

"Tell me about what happened on the bridge, Data."

Data cocked his head.

"You disobeyed my order," Donovan reminded him, without any reproval. He wanted to make it clear that Data wasn't going to be punished. "I thought your programming required you to follow orders from superior officers. My question is this: was there some confusion over who was higher-ranking?"

"No confusion, sir," said Data at once. "Commander Riker is higher-ranking."

"But I am higher-positioned," Donovan pointed out. "He's a commander. So yes, he's higher-ranked than me. But I am first officer of this ship, and he..." He searched for a delicate way to put it. "He's not approved for active duty yet," he said.

"That is correct," said Data.

And that was all he said. They stared at each other, each waiting for the other to go on.

"So..." Donovan struggled to understand. "Does your programming not allow for instances where a lower-ranking officer is in a position of authority?"

"It does, sir," said Data simply. "However, my programming also allows me to assess situations as they arise and make my own decisions. I assessed the situation on the bridge and decided it was more prudent to follow Commander Riker."

"Why?" asked Donovan.

"Because he required assistance," Data said.

"So it was a simple matter of where you were needed most?"

Data inclined his head. With a sigh, Donovan sat back.

"Data, when you're stationed on the bridge, you're expected to *stay* on the bridge. You know that."

"I do, sir," Data acknowledged. Donovan felt he was getting nowhere fast. He changed tracks.

"Tell me what happened when you left. What did Commander Riker need from you?"

Now, if it was possible, Data's face became a little more animated, as if he'd been holding back. "Commander Riker was physically weak, sir," he said promptly. "When the turbolift doors closed, he collapsed against the forward wall. I assisted him to his feet and supported him on his way to his quarters."

"Supported?" Donovan asked.

Data blinked. "Carried," he said.

Donovan's gut tightened. He scratched at his cuticle, letting his thoughts churn. "And in his quarters?" he asked.

“Commander Riker requested my help with a complete database search,” Data said. “Our target was a particular Romulan D’dere-dex-Class ship, also known as a warbird. Communication was quite difficult, sir. Due to Commander Riker’s stammer, I could not be certain what I was searching for without significant clarification.”

Slowly, Donovan stopped picking at his cuticles and curled his hands into fists. “Did he *always* stammer? I only noticed it today.”

“No, sir. It is a new development. I have recorded twenty-four instances of stammering within my earshot. Would you like to hear them?”

“No.” Donovan pulled up his own PADD and handed it to Data. “I assume you found something.”

“Schematics, sir. We did not find the particular ship Commander Riker was looking for.”

“Well, do me a favor,” Donovan suggested. “Pull up the schematics anyway.”

Data obliged. They were industry-standard, cobbled together from the Enterprise’s own encounters with Romulans — and a few helpful reports from their Klingon allies as well. Donovan studied the blueprints, paying particular attention to the shuttle bay. Then he accessed his own personal files and opened a visual aid: a photo of the crashed Romulan shuttle he’d found outside Riker’s farmhouse on Ipsand.

Even in this state of disrepair, it was clear. This shuttle belonged to a D’dere-dex-class warbird. Donovan met Data’s calm eyes and thinned his lips.

“Commander Riker escaped from a D’dere-dex-class,” he said. He took a slow, grounding breath. “I’m going to ask you to speculate on something, Data,” he said.

Data squared his shoulders. Donovan tilted his PADD, making the holographic blueprints warp.

“Why do you think Commander Riker wants to find this ship?” he asked.

It was a long time before Data spoke.

“Perhaps,” he said simply, “he wants to go back.”

Chapter 6

Ten-Forward was simultaneously the best and worst part of the Enterprise – outside of the Warp Core, of course. Here, Geordi could see all his friends, have a drink, relax, catch up. But here, too, there were living bodies packed tight, each one giving off different signals, a fluctuation of light and sound, of heat and vital signs, all of it combining to a needlepoint of electromagnetic pulses right to his temples. The implants throbbed inside his skull, sending shockwaves through the tender meat of his brain and making his smile unnaturally tight.

He turned to face the door, silently removing himself from the conversation. The door was soothing. Nobody stood there, so there were no pulses to dazzle his VISOR and pierce his eyes. He let the darkness wash over him and ease the pain away.

And then someone appeared in that damn empty doorway, and hesitated there. Geordi winced at the sudden flare of data and tried to focus. Whoever it was, his core body temperature was way too low, his heart rate too high – his breathing quick and shallow – his baseline stats eerily familiar, even though the rest of him was new–

Riker. Geordi pieced the unfamiliar signs together and cross-referenced them against what he knew from years of working together. *Riker!* He hadn't seen him since... Geordi jumped out of his seat, surprised when the bright, colorful wall of warning signs surged right for him at the same time.

"Geordi." Riker caught his arm, his palm slick with sweat.

"Commander. You okay?"

Riker hesitated. Once Geordi pieced the individual data-streams together, he could say one thing for certain: Riker looked terrible. But he sidled past Geordi and leaned against the bar like nothing was wrong, the same way he always used to – except his shoulders were a little tense, and his eyes kept darting around Ten-Forward to make sure no one snuck up on him. Geordi hesitated and folded his arms on the counter at Riker's side.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

Lines of strain stood out at the corners of Riker's eyes. He thought it over a bit too long for Geordi's comfort.

"I'm..." He flinched as an ensign squeezed past him to reach the bar. Then, with a huff of self-deprecating laughter, he attempted a Riker-worthy smile. "I'm bored to death."

Geordi offered him a tentative grin. "I heard they had you confined to sickbay for two whole weeks."

Riker gave an exaggerated grimace. "Yeah. Not that it's much better out here." He indicated his civilian clothes with a sweep of the hand. "Still, you can't get much worse than sickbay."

"I tried to visit you," Geordi said, keeping his voice light.

"Did you?" Riker's face was unreadable. He studied the drinks behind the bar with what seemed like feigned interest. "I guess I turned you away."

I guess? Geordi decided not to question that. "Yeah," he said. "Dr. Crusher said you just needed to sleep."

"I was pretty out of it. I'm sorry."

"Hey, I get it. Really, when you're sick, the best thing for you is rest. No one needs to entertain a dozen visitors from a biobed." Geordi turned to face the bandstand. He winced at the flare of feedback from his VISOR even as Riker shielded his eyes, presumably due to the bright lights. "I bet you're looking forward to rejoining the band. They've been missing their trombone player."

"An integral part of any outfit," said Riker a tad dryly, but the tight grimace was still there, creasing his features. "Geordi..."

He cut himself off.

"Yes?" said Geordi softly.

Another officer passed close by. Riker hunched his shoulders, his whole body twitching at the near-touch. He leaned hard against the counter to keep himself out of the officer's way, and when he met Geordi's eyes, he was sweating. "Let's get out of here," he said. "Somewhere with fewer people. I–"

His excuse, something about a headache, was lost beneath Geordi's quick answer. "Sure, Commander. You want to hit up the holodeck? The arboretum?"

"Your quarters?"

Geordi sucked in a sharp breath, unsure if he'd misunderstood. Riker turned strained blue eyes on him, silently pleading.

"Okay," said Geordi slowly. "Just to talk?"

"Yes." Riker's face fell as he caught Geordi's meaning. "Hell, Geordi. I didn't mean–"

"It's okay. I know." Geordi rubbed the back of his neck and gestured for Riker to lead the way. He was glad Riker went first, so he couldn't

see the warmth on Geordi's cheeks. He shouldn't have said anything. He knew the old Commander Riker would never ... but the old Commander Riker would have never undermined Donovan's authority on the bridge, or forced Data to leave his shift. Excuses aside, it was a faux pas, one that Geordi intensely regretted.

And one that Riker seemed to hardly notice.

Out in the hallway, Geordi expected the tension in Riker's shoulders to fade. It didn't. Riker glanced down the corridors to both sides, as if he didn't know which way to go.

"You're on Deck Seven?" he asked, voice tight.

"Yes, sir."

Riker tapped his chest where the combadge would be if he were in uniform. "Just Will. If that's okay."

Geordi offered him a smile. "It's fine. Can I ask you something?"

Riker shot a nervous look over his shoulder. If he heard the question, he didn't show it.

"Data told me you were having memory problems," said Geordi, keeping his voice low and discreet. That caught Riker's attention. He gave Geordi a curious look.

"Mildly. It's not as bad as it was." He hesitated. "Actually, I'd say I'm remembering too much."

What was Geordi supposed to make of that? He led Riker down the hall to the turbolift. Once inside, Riker placed his back firmly against the wall.

"Deck Seven," Geordi said. Then, after a quick scan of Riker's vital signs, "You remember me, then?"

Riker furrowed his eyebrows.

"I mean, you remember that we went to the Academy together, way back when?"

Riker gave him an innocent look. "Sure I do. You were the only exchange student from Cardassia." He ran a hand over his forehead, imitating the reptilian ridges of a Cardassian. "Congrats on the surgery, by the way. You look great."

Geordi leaned against the wall with an exasperated laugh. "Okay, fine. I'm sorry. Again."

"You should be. But I'll let it slide."

The turbolift spit them out on Deck Seven, and Riker took the lead this time, appearing more like his old self. He strode forward, confident and leisurely, walking a little slowly so Geordi could keep up. Geordi's quarters weren't far. He let Riker in and adjusted the lights, unaccustomed to turning them on when it was just him.

"Would you like to take your VISOR off?" Riker asked.

It was an odd question, but it didn't ring any warning bells for Geordi. Not yet. He kneaded the meat of his palm nervously while Riker paced the room, studying Geordi's awards on the far wall.

"I'm fine," Geordi said.

"It gives you migraines, doesn't it?" Riker said casually. He plucked up an old trophy for gravball and gave Geordi an appreciative look, eyebrows raised. "First place!"

Geordi grinned. "Don't look so surprised. We engineers aren't all nerds, you know." When Riker just chuckled, Geordi considered the question. "It's not as bad as it used to be. The VISOR."

"No?"

Silence. Riker was definitely getting at something. He had a grand poker face, and his vocal control was excellent, but he couldn't hide from Geordi's VISOR. His heart hammered at a worrying pace.

"Does Beverly still prescribe you those extra-strength painkillers?" Riker asked.

In the silence that followed, Geordi counted Riker's shallow breaths.

"Are you in pain?" Geordi asked finally. Riker shot him a guilty smile.

"I wasn't asking--"

"It's okay if you were," Geordi said quickly. He took a deep breath, trying to convince himself that it really *was* okay. "I trust you. If you say you need painkillers, then you need painkillers." He hesitated, then, as a show of faith, plugged a low dose into his replicator. Riker visibly relaxed, letting the tension out of his shoulders as a pre-loaded hypospray materialized. It dropped into the replicator's tray with a clatter.

"But I have to ask," said Geordi, closing the hypospray in his fist. "Why can't you just go to Dr. Crusher?"

Riker edged closer. Almost shyly, he held out his hand for the painkiller. Geordi dropped the hypospray into Riker's palm.

"She's been acting strange around me ever since I got back," said Riker softly. He held the hypospray to his pulse point with a practiced ease. There was no flinch as the dispensing spray notched into his skin. Did he realize Geordi had cut the normal dosage by 75%? Probably, but he was desperate enough to take it anyway, without arguing.

Geordi swallowed. "Strange how?" he asked.

Riker let out a clipped sigh. "She's tried to diagnose me with every disease in the handbook." He dropped the used hypospray into the reclamationator. Was it Geordi's imagination, or did he hesitate before letting go? "I think..." Riker started.

"What?"

Riker bit his lip. He couldn't meet Geordi's gaze. "I think she's trying to get me kicked out of Starfleet," he said.

Geordi couldn't stop himself. He let out a disbelieving laugh. He could tell Riker was serious: there was a hard glint in his eyes, a steady, determined drumming in his heartbeat. But it was a ridiculous notion.

"Sit down," he said, gesturing to the nearest chair. "That pain reliever comes with some nasty side effects, you know."

Riker shrugged.

"I mean, *really* nasty," Geordi lied. He sat across from Riker, his hands folded over his knees. "Can you do me a favor?"

Another shrug, twitchier this time.

"I'd like you to stay here for a few hours," Geordi said. "That way I can keep an eye on you. Make sure you don't keel over when the painkillers kick in."

Riker studied Geordi's face. The VISOR picked up on a thick layer of sweat over Riker's skin, even though his core body temperature remained worryingly low.

"Just how bad are these symptoms?" asked Riker. His pulse remained steady. He wasn't nervous, then, even though it sounded like a nervous question.

"Depends on the person," Geordi said.

"I guess there's no point telling you that I'm too busy for a sleepover," Riker said.

Geordi shook his head solemnly.

"Okay. What if I say no?"

"Then I tell Dr. Crusher that you came to me for painkillers without a prescription," Geordi said.

Riker's face contorted, like he'd bitten into something sour. "You don't believe me. About her."

"I believe you," said Geordi evenly.

"She's not the only one, you know," Riker said, his voice hard. He leaned forward, and for just a flash, he looked like his old self. But he hunched over his bent legs, arms wrapped around his middle, sweat pouring off his face, and the illusion vanished. "Lieutenant Commander Donovan. Captain Picard."

"You think the *captain* is sabotaging you?" asked Geordi.

"I think he got used to running a ship without me," said Riker with a flat bitterness that didn't suit him at all.

"So now he wants you gone?" Geordi waited, but Riker apparently didn't think it was worth confirming. "What about Counselor Troi?" he asked. "Is she in on it, too?"

"Don't – don't talk to me about Deanna." Riker shook his head in barely-concealed disgust. "I'll stay here, if those are your terms. But I'm not going to..."

Now, as he chewed off his own words, the symptoms of nervousness finally arrived. His heart pounded, his vital signs going crazy. He shifted in his seat like it physically hurt him to stay still.

"Not going to what?" Geordi asked.

Riker ground his palm into his eye and twisted at the waist, facing the opposite direction.

"What's the matter?" Geordi asked, his voice soft.

"My skin is on fire," Riker ground out. "Is that one of those 'nasty symptoms' you mentioned?"

No. It wasn't. In fact, Geordi rather suspected it was a symptom of withdrawal. What, precisely, Riker was withdrawing *from*, he didn't know. But he recognized the symptoms. He'd had a hard time of it, his first few months with the VISOR. Those debilitating migraines, the stress of keeping up with Academy life, the soothing rush of painlessness brought on by a hypospray. He settled into his chair with a sigh. Across from him, head still lowered, Riker scratched roughly at his scalp.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice so rough and flat that he sounded more like Worf than himself. "I'll play nice."

Geordi inclined his head. "I'd appreciate it."

With another rough scratch, Riker changed his tune. More pleasant now. "Did you ever get head lice?"

Oh, Geordi loved when people asked him questions like that while sitting in his favorite chair. He pulled his legs up, out of Riker's reach, and tried desperately not to cringe. "No," he said suspiciously. "Why?"

Riker seemed to realize what he was doing and dropped his hand with a laugh. "I got them twice while I was – while I was away. Not Terran head lice. This was on a planet called..." He scrunched up his face and waved his hand. "I don't remember. But the lice were terrible. You'd be up all night picking them off your skin and lighting candles to burn them. They looked more like spiders than lice."

Geordi gave a disgusted grunt. His mind was stuck on that forgotten planet name. It wasn't like Riker to forget a detail like that.

"That's what it feels like," Riker said. He clenched his hand into a fist, trying to resist the urge to scratch his scalp again. "Lice. All over." His face went cloudy, eyes distant. Then, to Geordi's immense relief, he changed the subject. "Did I miss a lot, while I was gone?"

Geordi shrugged one shoulder. "The usual. Never a dull day on the Enterprise."

Leg bouncing, Riker leaned forward. "Catch me up."

Geordi half-smiled. "You want to see my logs?"

He meant it as a joke, but for just a second, Riker looked almost tortured. "No," he said softly, sincerely. "I want to hear it from you." He clasped his hands tight. "Talk to me."

Geordi's heart thudded in his chest. "Okay. Well..." He cleared his throat. "We spent a good month just charting Obroa Skai. Just about drove the captain crazy. After that, we joined up with your old ship, the Hood, to explore the Nero System – uh, Counselor Troi ... she thought there was a good chance you might have wound up there. They have good relationships with the Ferengi, excellent medical systems. We thought..."

"And after that?" Riker interrupted, his eyes tight.

Geordi took the hint. "We did a supply run to Outpost Delta-Eight. And that led right into a patrol of the Romulan border, since we were right there. Captain Picard had to mediate a dispute between two of the local colonies – you'll have to ask him about it sometime. And, uh, we were in the middle of a research mission when Lwaxana Troi asked for an escort to the Basin Conference. You can imagine how well that went."

Riker gave an unconvincing smile, looking almost sick. "I bet Deanna wasn't happy."

"No, sir. She wasn't."

"Has she..." Riker hesitated. "Has she been...?"

"Okay?" Geordi guessed.

Riker managed a nod, his face grim.

"As much as she could be," said Geordi carefully. "I think she missed you."

Riker leaned forward in his seat. He scratched roughly at the back of his neck, his head lowered. Geordi couldn't see his face: but the cords of muscle in his forearms, the white knuckles on both hands... Geordi took a deep breath, marshaling his courage.

"Have you talked to her?" he asked.

"The Counselor?" asked Riker with his head still down, his voice tense. "We talked."

Briefly, Geordi guessed. He stretched out his leg and kicked lightly at Riker's shoe to get his attention. "Maybe you should try again," he said firmly.

Riker shrugged.

"You could've gone to her, you know," Geordi said. "Instead of me."

In the silence that followed, Riker's shoulders shifted to accommodate slow, tight breaths. Finally, he stood up, suppressing a full-body shiver. Sweat glistened in his hair as he marched toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Geordi asked.

"If you don't want me here—"

"That's not what I meant," said Geordi sharply, alarmed. He shot to his feet and met Riker at the door. When he grabbed Riker's hand to stop him from leaving, Riker squeezed his eyes shut and jerked back, like he couldn't even bear to *watch* Geordi touch him. He lurched backward until his shoulders hit the wall, and there he froze, shoulders tense, sizing Geordi up like a cornered animal.

Geordi stepped back. He raised his hands, the universal gesture of peace. The pinpoints of Riker's pupils dilated a little; his breathing slowed.

"Normally," said Geordi softly, "you would go to her, wouldn't you? I know you would. I don't *mind* that you came to me. I'm just ...

concerned.” When Riker just watched him, his chest still heaving, Geordi put his hands down. “Can we sit?” he asked, gesturing to their abandoned chairs.

In response, Riker slid to the floor. Geordi gave him twenty seconds to find his feet, but a harsh shiver rattled across Riker’s skin, and Geordi realized it wasn’t going to happen. With a nervous sigh, he joined Riker on the floor.

“How could I go to her?” Riker asked, so quiet Geordi almost didn’t hear him. He laced his fingers together and hid his face behind them, head bowed. There were no tears – Geordi could tell because his VISOR would have shown him the spark of heat in Riker’s eyes – but there *should* have been; the fact that there *weren’t* any was wrong, Geordi knew it in his bones. Across from him, Riker took a shallow, steadying breath.

“She’s our counselor,” Geordi said. “Anyone can go to her.”

Riker shook his head, his lips tight. “I forgot all about her,” he confessed. “She was a complete stranger. Her name. Her face.” His voice dipped into a whisper. “Her mind. I had no idea...”

No idea? A sizzle of unease started on Geordi’s scalp and trickled down to his arms, leaving gooseflesh everywhere it touched. He’d known Riker was struggling with memory issues – brain fog, was what he’d heard. But to forget about Counselor Troi entirely?

“How could I go to her?” Riker said. “What would I say?”

Geordi hesitated. Through his VISOR, he could see the unusual electromagnetic patterns playing out across Riker’s skin. His mind was overheating. Definitely withdrawal, but from what? Geordi edged a little closer and tentatively took Riker’s hand, cold and clammy.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Commander, I need you to tell me what you were on, okay?”

Riker didn’t seem to hear him. He muttered Deanna’s name – something Geordi couldn’t make out – something foreign, unfamiliar. ‘Arbat.’

“Will?” Geordi prompted. “I’m not going to call Dr. Crusher. I promise. I just need to know so I can look it up and see how severe your symptoms will be. I don’t need you dying on me, okay?”

No answer. Not at first. Then Riker pressed his palms to his eyes and croaked, “Yeah. Think of the mess.”

Geordi could have cried. He was at risk of losing control of himself and the situation. He managed a shaky smile. “Well, and I’ve gotten pretty fond of you, over the years.” He tapped Riker on the knee. “What was it?”

Riker pushed out a weary sigh. “Dryhaxalyn,” he said. What was visible of his face tightened.

“Dryhaxalyn?” Geordi repeated, taken aback.

“You can see why I don’t go to Deanna.”

Dryhaxalyn? The date-rape drug? It wasn’t even *legal* – but Geordi shut down his thoughts, fought back the creeping panic, and got to his feet, searching for his PADD. He could hear Riker muttering to himself as he typed the drug’s name into his database.

“You know how quickly my Starfleet training crumbled?” Riker was saying. Feverish. Unaware of himself, of his surroundings. “One day. Maybe less. I can’t even remember when I started – when I started to forget.”

Geordi glanced over his shoulder. Riker was rubbing the side of his neck, where a hypospray would go in. “Well, it says here dryhaxalyn causes memory loss,” Geordi said. “Especially over a long period of time.”

Riker snorted. “I can remember everything else just fine. Maybe not the dates, but...” He scrubbed at his face, suppressing a shudder. “Geordi, I can’t tell you how many ways they...”

Geordi’s throat tightened. He read through the withdrawal symptoms, praying for Riker to keep his mouth shut. Spells of fever, chills, paranoia, delirium ... nothing life-threatening.

“...used me...” Riker was saying. He wrapped his arms around his knees and curled up tight, hiding his face. “...emasculated me ... and I thought I didn’t care about *emasulation*, but...”

Geordi sank back to the floor across from Riker, his legs crossed underneath him. “But?”

Riker turned his head. He met Geordi’s gaze, a forced smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. “The helplessness,” he said. “The physical weakness—” Another symptom of dryhaxalyn. “—the complete undignified desperation for comfort, even if I had to degrade myself to get it. You ever been paralyzed by fear?”

“Sure,” Geordi said. He couldn’t think of any specific examples right now, but every officer aboard the Enterprise probably had been, at one point or another. Riker’s face creased, suddenly close to tears.

“There was a girl,” he started. “A child—”

And he cut himself off. Geordi sat forward, alarmed.

“Commander—”

“Do you hear that?” asked Riker in a whisper.

“No.” Geordi’s heart thudded in his chest. “When you say there was a child—”

Riker scrambled to his feet – a mad dash for balance, but strangely silent, like he'd learned to move quickly without making a sound. He stared up at the seams where the ceiling met the walls.

“What is it?” Geordi asked, a prickle of sweat starting beneath his arms, panic threatening to take hold.

“That sound,” Riker said, his voice thick. He touched the wall, checking for vibrations. “Those klaxons.”

“Commander, there aren't any klaxons.”

Riker turned to face him, his eyes glassy and wide. “They're not our klaxons,” he said, as if that explained everything. “They're Romulan.”

Geordi's stomach clenched. Slowly, he moved forward and wrapped his fingers around Riker's arm. The skin was cold even beneath Riker's shirt, the fabric soaked with sweat. He had a hard time keeping a grip, with how violently Riker was shivering.

“Come on,” Geordi said, leading Riker away. “There's no klaxons. There aren't any Romulans coming to get you. Let's sit down.” He was fighting to keep his voice steady.

It was like wrangling a mental patient, Geordi thought with dismay. Riker went easily enough – as docile as a child – but beneath Geordi's hands, his muscles were bunched so tight they should have been cramping, his arms like iron beneath the skin. Cold sweat slicked Geordi's grip, and he wasn't helped by the way Riker twisted at the hips, staring back at the wall – like he expected Romulans to burst through at any moment. Like he really did hear klaxons – voices – the soft hiss of an unwanted hypospray.

“Here,” Geordi said, sitting Riker down on the edge of his bed. He put a hand flat on Riker's chest, holding him in place as he knelt down. “Will you let me get your boots?”

No answer. Riker's teeth chattered, his knees knocking together as Geordi fought with the laces on his shoes. His socks were so wet that they came clean off when Geordi tugged the boots away. Slowly, still watching the wall, Riker shifted his hands onto Geordi's shoulders. His fingers clenched spasmodically, holding on tight.

“She's coming for me,” he said. His voice was raw and hoarse, like he'd been screaming. But he sounded almost lucid again. Gently, Geordi pushed him back until he lay down on the mattress.

“Who's coming?” Geordi asked. “Dr. Crusher?”

Riker stared up at him with wild eyes. “Arbat,” he said dully. “She won't stop until she has me back.”

“A Romulan?” Geordi guessed.

Riker nodded, his gaze locked on Geordi's VISOR. “Can you tell if I'm lying?”

Geordi hesitated. “Yes. Usually. I can tell from your heartbeat, your breathing...”

“If I say something right now, can you tell me if it's a lie?”

Geordi reached for the blankets, pulling them up over Riker's chest. He tucked him in automatically, without thinking. Part of him just wanted to hide the shivers wracking Riker's body, the still-thin frame, the scars.

“I'll give it a try,” he said, “if you promise to get some sleep.”

Riker's eyes crinkled in a grin that didn't reach his lips. “I promise.”

“Okay. Then try me.”

They stared each other down. Riker's eyes darted over Geordi's face. His smile disappeared, leaving him far more open, more easy to read, than Geordi was used to: no masks, no poker face. Just Riker, looking younger than he did even back at the Academy, when they were cadets together. Back then, he'd been walled-up, reserved, too focused on his ambitions to really let loose around the other cadets. On the Enterprise, for the last seven years, he'd been so different. Kind. Open. Loose. But now?

Riker's throat flashed as he swallowed.

“I want her to find me,” he said.

Geordi scanned his vital signs. He assessed the data without breathing.

“Am I lying?” Riker asked, and there was a tightness in his face that indicated he really didn't know. Geordi passed a hand over Riker's forehead, brushing back the sweat-matted hair.

“Go to sleep, Commander,” he said.

Chapter 7

Donovan eyed the notification on his PADD. The new file came straight from Picard, and it had been uploaded straight to Donovan's personal folder, signed and unsealed by the captain. The title blinked at him in glowing yellow letters, feeling almost like an accusation:

William T. Riker, AWOL report.

Donovan chewed his bottom lip and paced his quarters. He'd heard from the captain that it was happening; after a year of captivity, Commander Riker was finally considered well enough to report on where he'd been. What he'd done. Why he hadn't made his way back. Despite the label, AWOL, Donovan was sure no blame would be laid at Riker's feet. He knew Picard better than that.

"Computer," Donovan said, "play audio file."

His speaker pulsed with energy. Riker's voice tumbled out a moment later, soft and stammering, a little breathless. Donovan listened to that deadened voice, the numbness in it, for only a second.

"Stop audio," he said, feeling ill. Unnerved by Riker's voice, Donovan felt his own vitals spiking. He crossed to his desk and pulled up the transcript instead.

A crick formed in his neck and the small of his back as he plunged into Riker's report. The opening description of his shuttle crash, the details of what went wrong – Donovan knew all this from the after-action analysis, but he forced himself to read it in full, dutifully attentive to Riker's point of view. His fingers itched, though. He wanted to know what had caused those ghastly scars. The whip marks up and down Riker's back, the evil-looking gashes on his ribs and down his thighs, the bruised-looking mark around his neck where he must have broken the skin escaping a noose. His own thoughts were impeding his ability to process the contents of the report.

Donovan slowed. His stomach turned. He forced himself to read the gruesome details of Riker's time as a planet-side slave, before he was ... *requisitioned* to a Romulan ship. Only one escape attempt before then, he noted with surprise. But it was successful. There was a month of time glossed over in Riker's report – after he killed his Ferengi slavemaster, but before he was captured by Romulans. What had he done during that time? Why hadn't he left the planet, sought help? He made a quick note to pursue these troubling questions.

Donovan read on.

Here, with the Romulans, with the Tal Shiar ... Donovan sucked a breath through his teeth. On a separate PADD, he pulled up a years-old report on Romulan torture methods, their aftereffects, translations of the terms Riker had put down in the native Romulan tongue.

Moh't'soh yssri – Donovan typed the unfamiliar letters into his second PADD. "Stomach torture." A diagram popped up, making Donovan wrinkle his nose. The victim was fed a long, wet length of cloth – forced to swallow it – and then, once it reached his stomach, it was ripped right back out through the mouth.

Lehyyak aoni'rhnnohsyrrhhdh – how the hell did Riker remember a word that long? Donovan cross-checked it with a grimace. There was a Romulan medical device, a sort of liquid balm that injured parties floated in, similar to the Federation's biobeds. With electricity diverted through the fluid, it slow-broiled its victims even as the balm healed them – an endless cycle of pain, near-death, rejuvenation...

Kautparr – a parasite inserted into an open wound to eat at the dead flesh. *Raydharaat* – simple dehydration, prolonged until the victim perfects the pronunciation of the Romulan word for 'water.' Donovan glanced back up the list, at that long gibberish-sounding word from earlier. *Aoni'rhnnohsyrrhhdh*. It didn't sound right coming from Human vocal cords; maybe they didn't have the throat structure for it. He imagined trying to pronounce with a tongue thick and dry from lack of water, with dehydration shutting his mind and body down... remembered the Battle of Jawal, that long hot march across the desert, the desperate plunge for water of any kind, hot or salty, mineral or infected, even body fluids, even blood...

There was a knock at the door. Donovan closed the file on his PADD with a startled jab of the finger, like he'd been caught looking at something illicit. His heart hammered in his chest. A quick drag of his sleeve erased the telltale sweat from his forehead.

"Who's there?" he called, fighting to keep his voice steady. He took a slow, deep breath to center himself.

A familiar, nervous voice answered him. "Geordi La Forge."

Just La Forge. Donovan swept a hand over his face, as if to clear a slate. When he stood, his features were perfectly composed – and he answered the door with eyebrows raised, tilting his head back to study Geordi's face. Lips pursed, corners trembling, cheeks hollow.

"Sir, it's—" Geordi hesitated, clasping and unclasping his hands over his middle. "It's Commander Riker."

Donovan's eyes sharpened. "What about him?"

Geordi glanced down the hallway to make sure no one was in earshot. He lowered his voice. "He came to my quarters last night. I think he was going through..." His chest expanded in a shallow breath. "Sir, he asked for my painkillers. He was sweating up a storm. Shaking. I..."

Donovan caught himself staring at Geordi's pips, his breath frozen in his lungs. A commander visiting his subordinate's quarters – in the middle of withdrawal, no less—

"He stayed the night," said Geordi, and from the way he angled his head, Donovan got the impression Geordi was studying him. "But when I woke up in the morning, he was already gone. He hasn't been answering my comms; so far as I know, no one has seen him." His voice betrayed the poorly concealed anxiety. Geordi appeared as Donovan had felt only moments earlier.

Donovan took a step out into the hallway and faced the black screen built into the wall. Heart pounding, he said, "Computer, where is Commander Riker?"

"*Commander Riker is in his quarters.*"

"How long has he *been* in his quarters?"

The computer's soothing voice came back at once. "*Twelve hours, forty-five minutes.*"

Donovan and Geordi exchanged looks.

"He ... *is* allowed to stay in his quarters, if he wants to," Donovan said awkwardly. "Knowing you, you already checked for life signs?"

Geordi worried at his fingers. "His life signs are ... okay. But not the best, if I'm being honest." His expression was imploring Donovan.

Donovan stroked his chin. "Did you speak with Dr. Crusher?"

"I did." Donovan got the distinct impression that he was Geordi's last resort. "She spoke to Commander Riker over comm. He denied medical assistance."

"Then he is in *need* of medical assistance? But not *dire* medical assistance?"

Geordi squared his shoulders. "Sir, I suspect it's a lot more *dire* than he lets on. You didn't see him last night. I'm requesting permission to--"

"Granted." Donovan waved a hand, gesturing for Geordi to lead the way. "I'm coming with you."

Geordi jolted into action. He took off at a quick stride, and if he was surprised that Donovan could keep up, he showed it only mildly – with a brief sideways glance, a reappraisal. Donovan let his mind swirl, focusing on Riker. Having read the report, everything he went through with the Ferengi, with the Romulans – he could well understand Riker's need to hide. He hurried along the hall to the diplomatic suite where Riker was ensconced, bracing himself for what they may find.

Before Geordi could knock, Donovan tapped his combadge.

"Donovan to Riker," he said pleasantly.

No response.

"Requesting access," Donovan said.

No response. Donovan tapped his combadge again to make sure it was awake.

"Donovan to Riker," he said in the same pleasant tone. "I have Mr. La Forge here with me. He--"

The computer screen next to Riker's door lit up with an array of glowing words:

Request Granted: Donovan.

Request Denied: La Forge.

Geordi and Donovan studied each other. Finally, with a curt nod (and crossed arms), Geordi stepped back. When Donovan passed his hand over the access pad, the door slid open to let him in.

He entered. Smooth jazz played at a low volume, just high enough to scratch his ears and flow, warm and welcome, over the lines of his veins. He had to squint through the low light, stalking from one room to the next – and suddenly he felt like he was bent low on a quiet battlefield at dusk, waiting for an ambush while the shadows half-hid his form.

There. By the window, where he could see the racing stars. Riker was bowed so low, so tense, that at first sight Donovan's eyes skipped over him. Then he looked again, saw the white-knuckled fingers grasping at Riker's ribs, clawing at his arms in slow-motion – the shivers wracking his body as he sank to his knees. He resembled a wounded animal. Donovan rushed forward, his palms skittering over Riker's bony spine to support him, but with a mighty jerk, Riker flinched away.

"What--" Donovan started, and then he noticed the chemical stink emanating from Riker's skin. The paleness. The glassy quality to his eyes. "Shit," Donovan muttered. He tapped his combadge. "Dr. Crusher--"

He was on his back before understood that he'd been hit. Numb pain rippled over his lower jaw and one strong, broad hand clamped over his mouth; the other tore his combadge off. Donovan, stunned, forced his arms to lash out, his legs to kick, but it was too late – the weight of Riker's body on his chest disappeared, the numbness faded, a thousand needles dispensing cold bruising pain into his jaw.

Riker paced the room on trembling legs. He twisted the stolen combadge in his hands.

"I need dryhaxalyn," he said to Donovan, his voice hoarse, his tone ultra-reasonable, and his eyes wildly searching the room.

Donovan sat up slowly. He checked the back of his head for blood, the line of his jaw for swelling. "You're in withdrawal, Commander," he said, a little marble-mouthed. "You need to give my combadge back. The two of us--"

Riker shook his head in disgust. He beat a hasty retreat out of Donovan's reach and swayed, knees buckling. He leaned against the far wall for support. With Donovan's combadge close to his lips, he said, "Commander Data."

A surprised-sounding Data answered, “*Data here.*”

“This is Commander Riker. What’s the status on that Romulan D’deredex-class ship?”

Donovan circled Riker slowly, trying to look nonthreatening. A wounded animal was unpredictable and potentially dangerous. Sweat had soaked through Riker’s clothing, turning the fabric transparent, so Donovan could *see* the moment a full-body cramp took over. It started in his legs, where his thighs tensed into iron, and shot up to his abs where every muscle clenched tight, but Riker didn’t make a sound. He just gritted his teeth and braced himself against the wall.

“*Sir, I have not found—*”

Riker ended the transmission with a vicious jab of his thumb. He hurled the combadge over Donovan’s shoulder, and by instinct, Donovan ducked his head. He heard the combadge clatter against the far wall. When he looked up, Riker had lost his footing. He’d slid down the wall until he was half-collapsed on the floor, his shirt rucked up to his chest, his whole body quivering with tension and pain.

“Sir,” said Donovan softly. He crouched nearby, just out of Riker’s reach. “You need to go to sickbay.”

Riker shook his head. His over-long hair fell into his eyes, hid his expression.

“We don’t know how severe dryhaxalyn withdrawal can be,” Donovan urged, keeping his voice gentle. “It could kill you.”

“Fine,” said Riker roughly. Donovan thought at first that he was agreeing to leave, but Riker didn’t move. The truth settled in like a greasy skin over Donovan’s stomach.

“It’s fine if it kills you?” he asked.

With Riker’s head down, Donovan couldn’t see his face. He pursed his lips and duck-walked a little closer. He bent his elbow until his hand hovered near his swollen jaw, palm out and fingers splayed.

“Show me your hand,” he said.

Riker shuddered, throat flexing as he swallowed back bile. Donovan guessed the sudden surge of nausea helped to make him a little more docile – more obedient – because without asking any questions, Riker raised his hand so that his palm almost touched Donovan’s.

“Mimic my movements,” Donovan said. He watched as Riker’s fingers trembled and knocked together, hard enough to bruise his knuckles. Donovan made a Vulcan greeting sign. It took Riker three tries to force his shaking hand to comply and do the same. Next Donovan formed a pistol shape. Riker’s fingers twitched – his thumb tucked – his hand spasmed and released. He slapped his palm against the floor and pulled away, curling up hard against the wall. The fight was going out of him.

They both knew the test results weren’t good. There was no need to say it. Donovan shifted, getting his legs under him, and sat cross-legged with a sigh.

“Can I beam you to sickbay?” he asked.

“*No.*”

A single syllable, miserable and rough. Donovan focused on his own breathing. Slow. Calm. A meditation, a psalm, a crackling fire with Luvu smiling at him from the other side.

“I read your report,” he said softly. “To Captain Picard.”

Riker wrapped shaking arms around his knees. When he swept sweat-soaked hair out of his eyes, the chemical scent in the room strengthened, billowed, filled Donovan’s lungs.

“I understand you crashed your shuttle,” said Donovan evenly, watching Riker’s face for a reaction. “You were badly injured, right? But when you woke up, you were clean, healthy, cared for.”

Nothing. Just those same glassy eyes, those tight facial muscles pulling beneath the skin.

“It was the Ferengi who rescued you,” Donovan said. He paused. “Do you consider it a rescue?”

Riker bared his teeth. “Yes,” he said, his voice like iron.

“Even though they branded you?” He nodded down at the tattoo on Riker’s wrist. “Even though they sold you?”

“Yes.”

“You told Picard they drugged you. Broke you in.” Donovan steadied himself with a deep breath. “You said you contracted just about every sexually transmitted disease in the galaxy. But now you say they *rescued* you.”

A muscle cramp tightened Riker’s body and forced one leg to unbend, the calf knotting up even as Riker stretched it out for relief. “If you’re asking me whether I wish they’d just left me for dead—” he said.

“No.” Donovan retreated and ran back over the report in his mind, hyper-cognizant of the thin, shallow breaths Riker was taking, the way his lips parted and he fought for oxygen. “But you *killed* the Ferengi eventually, didn’t you? Her name was Fremat. Your slavemaster. And you snapped her neck.”

Riker didn't deny it. He just sucked in another hollow breath, his eyes unfocused now.

"When did the Romulans find you?" Donovan asked.

No answer.

"Not long after. A month, maybe two. And ever since then, you were their captive." Donovan recited the names flatly. "Arbat, the commander. Gurteen, of Tal Shiar. Ottradek, the visiting admiral. Who hurt you more?"

Riker's breath wheezed out between clenched teeth. His eyes bored into Donovan's, so dark now that if Donovan didn't know they were blue, he'd never be able to tell. "They all hurt me," he ground out. "I didn't keep score."

"Yes," Donovan whispered. He inched a little closer. "So why do you want to find them? It's Arbat's ship you're looking for, isn't it?"

Without breaking eye contact, without blinking, Riker gave a shallow nod.

"You want to make them suffer like you suffered?" Donovan asked. He glanced down at Riker's scars. "You want to emasculate them? Gurteen threatened to castrate you. Do you want to castrate *him*? And Arbat, Ottradek, they tortured you until your voice gave out from screaming. Is that what you want to do? Torture them? Make them scream?"

He saw Riker's hand darting forward, but he made no effort to dodge it – probably didn't have the speed to anyway. Trembling fingers closed around Donovan's shirtfront and dragged him closer. With his nose almost touching Riker's, he could smell the chemical sting of dryhaxalyn coming through his sweat, the bile on his breath. See the fire in his eyes.

"I want to go back," Riker said, just above a whisper.

Donovan searched his face, uncomprehending. The grip on his shirt slackened.

"There's nothing for me here," Riker said quietly. He slumped back against the wall, resigned and still shivering, and folded his arms over his gut like it hurt. "*I want to go back.*"

A cold chill ate at Donovan's spine. He stood numbly, on shaky legs, and looked down at the broken man huddled on the floor before him. This time, when he crossed the room for his combadge, Riker didn't try to stop him. He fixed it to his uniform and came back, unsure what to say.

He held out a hand. Riker, as if sensing it, lifted his fingers and let the tips brush against Donovan's palm. "The only place you're going," said Donovan firmly, "is sickbay. You understand?"

No answer. He leveraged Riker to his feet, using all his strength to support the larger man. They took a stumbling step toward the door, where Donovan prayed Geordi was still waiting.

He almost missed Riker's words. Quiet, miserable, almost confessional.

"Don't give me any dryhaxalyn," he said.

Chapter 8

“You’re swaying on your feet,” Beverly said.

She only said it in a murmur, so quiet the nurses couldn’t hear, but Donovan still jumped at the sound of her voice. He gave her a narrow-eyed look – then over her shoulder, toward Riker’s private room, to the little circular window that allowed medics to peek inside.

“Is he stable?” he asked.

Beverly’s face softened. “He’s past the worst of it now. You and Geordi weathered the most extreme symptoms on your own, it seems.”

Was there a hint of reproach in her voice? Probably. And well-deserved, thought Donovan ruefully. One or both of them should have called sickbay much sooner. He rubbed the back of his neck and offered up his only defense.

“It seemed wise to keep his trust. He doesn’t have a lot to go around.”

Beverly pursed her lips, her face unreadable. “I know,” she said simply. She put a hand on Donovan’s arm and guided him to the small window in Riker’s door.

He’d showered recently. The sweat-matted hair was soft and clean now, his face still pale, his eyes still bruised. There had been a time, Donovan knew, when Riker raged at the medics – threw whatever wasn’t bolted down – swung his fists, kicked out at them, scrambled to get the wall at his back and lashed out at anyone who came near. He still bore some minor scars from those hours: scraped knuckles and swollen joints he wouldn’t allow Beverly to fix. But he sat cross-legged on his bunk with a comm lit up in front of him, his face serious and his eyes alert, speaking to his Fleet-appointed counselor for the first time.

“He’ll be fine,” Beverly said softly, pulling Donovan away. “He just needs rest. And he’s not the only one.”

Donovan sighed. “*One* of us just went through the most severe withdrawal period I’ve ever seen. I don’t think my insomnia really compares.”

“And you’re an expert on withdrawal now?”

Donovan’s features froze. He kept his eyes on the window, his face wooden. Out of the corner of his eye, Beverly was just a shadow of red hair and blue clothes, sharp and delicate. A living scalpel with the blade poised right over his medical file, ready to lance into the tender flesh and expose everything underneath. Beverly sucked in a slow breath through her teeth, as if remembering the details only now.

“Lieutenant Commander...” she started. Now would be the time to head her off – change the subject – but Donovan’s sharp brain had turned dull. And mercifully, before she could finish her sentence, Beverly changed her mind. Lips pursed, she said, “Maybe you should talk to Counselor Troi.”

“Why?” said Donovan roughly.

Beverly inched closer, forcing herself out of his periphery, into full view. “You’ve spent the last forty hours either directly caring for Commander Riker or waiting outside his room for updates,” she said. “It may not compare to the excitement of an away mission, but it *does* count as stress. You might benefit from a counseling session.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I know how to take care of stress.”

He said it quietly, without any tone, and Beverly held her breath for a moment before nodding. She left him there, with her words still ringing in his head and a perfect view of Riker right in front of him. He watched the light of a viewscreen play over Riker’s pale face, casting shadows in the hollows of his cheeks. Through the door, Donovan could hear the lilt and roll of Riker’s voice, the occasional stammer, but he couldn’t make out the words. He felt, again, Riker’s hands clutching at his shirt; heard again Riker’s broken voice begging to go back to Arbat, insisting it was what he wanted, what he needed. That he didn’t belong here. That he didn’t know these people. That the Enterprise wasn’t home.

He’ll be fine, Donovan told himself fiercely, desperately, and he forced himself to leave.

The holodeck was empty when Donovan showed up, eyeballs itching from lack of sleep. He checked the program list under his name. There was a catalog of archaeological dig sites and ruins – medieval British tombs where he could take brass rubbings for his collection — Crusader castles to sketch and explore, all scattered through the old Earth regions of Syria, Lebanon, and the still-thriving Israel. Donovan skimmed past the program for Carchemish and landed on the Bajoran sector. The art museum with its missing pieces. The dig site where he’d met Luvo for the first time. Where Luvo’s broken body was found, wrapped in nothing but the dusty tablecloth they used to display artifacts for cleaning.

Donovan swallowed past a dry throat. He exited his programs and opened Riker’s instead, idly curiosity driving him on. Idle curiosity and the burning desire for a drink. He eyed Riker’s jazz bar program for a second too long, imagined the burn of bourbon sliding down his throat, warming his lungs – no. What else was there?

Wilderness exploration. Mountain climbing. Exercise programs and combat arenas. All very masculine stuff; from what Donovan remembered of Kyle Riker, he’d certainly approve. But none of these programs had been accessed since the day Riker went missing over a year before.

Only one new program had taken their place.

Donovan scanned it. The title offered him no clues: Private Program #1, Locked. He accessed the metadata, but it had been scrubbed clean of anything damning. He couldn’t even determine what planet it was based on, if any, or what other programs it might have been cobbled from.

But he could access two crucial pieces of information. One: that it had been created just one week ago, when Riker was released from sickbay for the first time.

Two: That it had been accessed twelve times since.

Donovan's dry tongue clicked in his mouth. This was useless. He closed the programs list and exited the holodeck entirely, giving it up to an anxious-looking engineering lieutenant who had been lurking in the corridor. Donovan let his baser instincts guide him through the ship's passageways to the glittering lights of Ten-Forward, where quiet music and quieter conversation filled the air.

Instinctively, he scanned the patrons, not sure what he was looking for: a friendly face, a dangerous threat. But he found the last person he wanted to see. Ensign Ro. Donovan wavered, torn between staying (first officer dignity) and fleeing (arguably the right thing to do), and his indecision cost him the chance to make a choice at all. Ro cut through the crowd, her sharp eyes locking him in place, and leaned on the bar at his side.

"Nice of you to join us," she drawled. Donovan went still; he could smell the alcohol on her breath, and the scent of replicated rye wine sent him back to Bajor. "Were you feeling nostalgic?" Ro asked. "Hoping to reminisce about the good old days?"

"Reminisce with whom?" Donovan asked, keeping his voice level. "With you?"

"Are there any other Bajorans aboard?" Ro asked.

She said it so casually, but her voice sliced right through him. Donovan leaned against the bar, all his weight resting on his folded arms. "What do you want, Ensign?" he asked, emphasis on her rank.

All traces of faux-casual friendliness disappeared. Ro leaned down to scan his face, her elfin features drawn tight. "I'd like to know when you're leaving," she said flatly.

"Leaving?"

"We got our first officer back," said Ro with a trace of contempt, as if she didn't much care for Riker, either. "Isn't it time you moved on?"

"I'm not leaving," Donovan said.

"Why not? That's what you do." Her voice dropped. Donovan kept his eyes lightly closed so she couldn't lock gazes with him, his heart hammering in his chest. "You cut and ran when the going got tough. The Cardassians swooped in and the Killer of Kallonia was nowhere to be found – but all the Bajoran resistance fighters left behind were still there."

Slaughtered. She didn't need to say it. He knew. Ro studied his face a moment longer, then pulled back with a shake of her head.

"At least put up a damn fight," she muttered to herself — disgusted, voice thick. It was that thickness, that sudden twist of emotion, that made Donovan look at her, but by then it was too late. She'd turned away by the time he thought to glance at her; she'd disappeared through the entrance to Ten-Forward by the time he thought to reach out.

Only then did he become aware of a gentle presence behind the bar, a blur of violet velvet at the corner of his eye.

"Water," he said to Guinan.

He didn't pay much attention to what she did next. He'd long grown past the watchful, defensive stage of asking for water at a bar — and Guinan had never questioned him about it, so Donovan was completely unprepared when she just splayed her hands on the counter and leaned forward.

"Just water?" she said, her eyes twinkling.

Donovan blinked. He hunched his shoulders. "Yes."

"You sure? I make a mean Mai Tai..."

"I'm sure," said Donovan, wounded. He watched her, baffled, as she shrugged and turned away. What the hell was this? Some kind of teasing effort to goad him into talking? He considered just leaving, but before he could move away from the bar, Guinan returned.

She set a glass of water by his right hand. By his left, she set a cocktail, tall and pink and vaguely glittery, a wedge of fruit and a fuchsia flower floating in the synthehol.

"This is a favorite," Guinan said in her soft, slow voice. "Commander Riker calls it the Enterprise-D. You know why?"

Stiffly, Donovan nudged the cocktail away and downed a swig of water.

"Because *everyone* wants a sip of this when they see it going by," Guinan said. She swept the cocktail onto a tray and pretended to be a waiter, doing a slow graceful circle behind the counter. The starlight caught on the glitter inside the Enterprise-D, making the drink sparkle and dance inside its glass.

Donovan turned back to his water, unamused.

"I guess you're more of a bourbon man," said Guinan easily. She took a sip of the Enterprise-D and set it aside. "I can whip you up something nice, if that's the case. Do you prefer the real deal, or synthehol?"

“Synth—” Donovan bit his tongue. “*Neither*. Just water is fine.”

Guinan gave him a mild grin. “Did I tempt you for a moment there?”

“No, I just — synthehol is smarter,” Donovan said, desperate for the conversation to end. “But I don’t want either.” He took a deep breath, forcing himself to relax his hands. He left palmprints of sweat on the glass of water. “Guinan, I didn’t come here to talk. I was just thirsty.”

“I can tell.” She procured a cold pitcher of water from beneath the bar and topped off his glass. “Let’s change the subject. Is that alright?”

“Please.”

“I heard Commander Riker’s doing better.” She swept the mixed drink out of sight, and Donovan caught himself sighing in relief. “Is it true he’s already had his first session with his new counselor?”

Donovan tried to keep his walls up. It was hard; the removal of alcohol, the change of subject, had both done too much to relax him. “Are you trying to gossip with me?” he asked uneasily.

“You could call it gossip,” said Guinan, her voice even. “Or you could call it concern.”

Donovan elected not to answer. He sipped the too-cold water, relishing the way it settled against his gums and made his teeth ache.

“Maybe that’s why you’re so uptight,” Guinan said lightly.

Donovan shot her a sharp look.

“He’ll get his three signatures soon,” Guinan explained. “Once he has those, he’ll be back to active duty. And ... is it presumptuous to assume he’ll be first officer?”

She said it so politely that Donovan had to answer. “No,” he said shortly. “Not presumptuous.”

“Is that why you’re upset?” asked Guinan gently. “Worried about your new position?”

“I’m not upset,” Donovan insisted. To his dismay, he said it with a little too much urgency. He clasped his hand tight around the glass of water, letting the icy walls sting his palm. He was at risk of crushing the glass. “It’ll be a slow hand-over, Guinan. Months, most likely.”

“But a slow hand-over is still a hand-over,” she pointed out.

“It doesn’t matter.” How to phrase it? He took a steadying breath. “I’m used to roaming from station to station. I’m a problem-solver; I like to see situations resolved and move onto the next. Does that make sense?”

Guinan dipped her head. “In this case, the problem was a missing first officer. And the solution...”

Donovan waved his hand. “Well, he’s been found.”

Silence settled between them. Guinan moved away, pouring drinks for two newcomers to the bar. The clink of ice and hiss of pouring alcohol wormed into Donovan’s ears and threaded through the coils of his brain. By the time Guinan returned, he had his shoulders hunched up so high it hurt. He dreaded her return.

“Well, for what it’s worth,” Guinan said, “I agree with you.”

“You do?”

She gave a lazy shrug. “It’s not like you have family here,” she said. “My impression is, you don’t have much interest in calling the Enterprise your home. Right?”

“Right,” Donovan answered slowly. The conversation had passed the point of pleasantness. It felt like an interrogation.

“Because you have a family,” Guinan continued.

This time Donovan didn’t agree. An acute feeling of unease was taking hold. Where was she headed? What did Guinan know? He stared intently into his drink, remembering Luvo and the Bajoran sect he once considered his brothers. The very same people he’d led to victory against the Cardassians and then abandoned to free the rest of their planet on their own. An image added to the torture: the servant-class boy he’d rejected, thrown from his tent half-naked, afraid to say yes. He could see it all: the naked body wrapped in a tablecloth, abandoned in the ruined dig site where they first met.

Donovan swept a nervous hand over his brow with a sigh. He was close to losing his composure. It hadn’t been Cardassians who killed Luvo. It hadn’t been a rival sect. It had been his own people. *His family*. Maybe they caught Luvo sneaking out of his tent that night? Did they punish kill one of them to punish them both? Perhaps they just never liked Luvo — always found him a little odd, a little out of step with the sect’s traditions. But Donovan had loved that boy. He’d loved the men who killed him. He had loved them *all*.

“You want that drink now?” Guinan asked lightly.

Donovan squeezed his eyes shut. His voice came out in a whisper. “No.”

“Well, take your time with the water.” A gentle hand passed over his forearm. “And Donovan?”

He forced himself to look up.

“Congratulations on your new assignment,” Guinan said. “Wherever that may be.”

Chapter 9

Donovan knew why they were gathered in Picard's ready room. Dr. Crusher, Counselor Troi, and Captain Picard had already signed the paperwork to return Commander Riker to limited light duty. He'd read the reports. Riker was, as of two days ago, no longer dryhaxalyn-dependent. His counselor reported full cooperation and baseline mental stability, with a strong recommendation that Riker return to work as soon as possible. He had passed all the necessary physical tests. All that remained was to inform the commander himself.

But when Riker stepped through the door, thin and pale, with his beard neatly trimmed and his hair clipped short again, Donovan still thought he looked like a lost child.

"Number One," said Picard with forced brightness. Riker froze just inside the doorway, his eyes darting from one officer to the next. He eased his back against the wall and stayed where he was.

"Captain," he said. He glanced at Deanna and a ghost of a smile crossed his face before it disappeared. "What's going on?"

"You're out of uniform, first of all." Picard stepped forward while Riker was still processing this. By the time he handed over a PADD, Riker understood. He searched Picard's face, his eyebrows raised, and then turned his attention to the PADD screen – to his orders.

The smile came back. At Donovan's side, Deanna took a deep breath, her shoulders lifting from a slouch they'd been set in for months. She offered her hand tentatively, as if she wasn't sure what would happen, and after a moment Riker reached out and hooked his fingers around hers.

"Welcome back, Will," she said.

The new haircut was disconcerting. The uniform, too. For the past few months, the name "William Riker" had been connected to the image in Donovan's mind of a gaunt, naked man gasping for breath on a filthy farmhouse bed, his pale skin covered in scars. Even as his beard grew in, the long hair remained, and that, paired with the civilian clothes, kept the Ferengi sex slave from really solidifying into "Will Riker" in Donovan's head.

But now, from head to toe, the images matched up. The comfortable disconnect had been removed. The man sitting beside him in the Enterprise's Alpha-shuttle was the same as the man in Starfleet's personnel files: a sweep of brown hair, just slightly tinged with silver; a full beard, neatly clipped and soft to the touch; broad shoulders and sharp blue eyes scanning the controls. Will Riker had finally returned.

"Alright," Riker said briskly, his fingers dancing over the dashboard. "What's on the agenda?"

It had fallen to Donovan to make sure Riker's practical skills were still up to snuff. He checked his PADD, where a list of routine Academy maneuvers were partitioned out.

"You're going to take us on an empty-craft run around the moon first," he said. "We'll do a practice dip into the planet's atmosphere, and if all goes well, we'll come back for cargo and do a proper supply run down to the surface. Sound good?"

"Sounds boring," Riker muttered, but when Donovan glanced over, he had a soft, distracted smile on his face. "Do you like conversation, Commander? Fill the silence?" His fingers hovered over a button overhead. "Or do you prefer music?"

"No music," said Donovan a touch severely. "This is a skills test, remember?"

It was obvious that Donovan was the more stressed of the two. Riker's grin grew a fraction.

"Conversation it is."

He called the engines to life with a hum. He really did look better, Donovan decided, and not just superficially: there was a healthy flush to his skin and a clarity in his eyes that hadn't been there before. When he reached for the steering stick, it was with steady hands and an air of confidence.

"Do you remember much of the last few months?" Donovan asked as Riker guided the shuttle out.

If Riker was uncomfortable with the question, he didn't show it. He kept his eyes on the shuttle's flight path. "Hmm ... most of it. Is this part of the test?" He shot Donovan an impish grin. "Distract me with hard questions?"

"I wouldn't do that while I'm in the passenger seat," Donovan assured him, and Riker barked out a laugh.

"That's how my dad handled it when we flew together," he said. "He'd save up every bad report from school and wait till we were in the air. Called it a stress test."

Donovan coughed, which was as close as he could get to laughing. He settled into his seat, arms crossed over his middle. The trip around the nearest moon was astonishingly smooth – better than many professionally-manned flights Donovan had taken – and by the time they dipped into the planet's atmosphere, he'd relaxed entirely.

"Your dad taught you how to fly?" he asked, forcing himself to make conversation.

Riker angled the shuttle's nose down. "My *flight instructor* taught me how to fly," he corrected with a grin. "Dad just made sure he was doing his job."

“And you were eleven?” Donovan guessed. He remembered from Riker’s file, but he tried to sound less certain than he was. It didn’t matter. Riker glanced over, first surprised, then with eyes narrowed.

“Yeah, that’s right,” he said, a little more guarded now. “You must have read my file pretty closely…”

“I wanted to see whose shoes I was filling,” Donovan explained. “And I knew your father. Remember?”

He could see from the slight pinching around Riker’s eyes that he didn’t.

“We called him together,” Donovan prompted him, waiting for Riker to complete the memory.

Riker chuckled. He led the shuttle back out of the atmosphere, to the relative quiet of space. “We did not,” he said. “I wouldn’t allow it.”

“You did.” Donovan’s voice was firm.

Riker shifted uneasily in his seat. “What did he say?” he asked finally, shooting a glance at Donovan. A bit of resignation had crept into his voice.

“He never answered,” said Donovan.

At that, Riker seemed to relax a little. He guided the shuttle back into the Enterprise’s dock and settled into the clamps. Engines off, he popped the hatch and surged to his feet, ducking a little so his head didn’t clash with the low ceiling.

“C’mon,” he said, surprisingly friendly for how tense he’d been a moment ago. “Let’s load her up.”

Outside, the strain of quick manual labor battered all conversation away. Donovan leaned into it. It gave him the chance to assess what data he’d collected and compose his thoughts. Riker’s skills were unimpeachable – possibly the best flying Donovan had seen. But Picard hadn’t been worried over-much about Riker’s *skills*; what he really wanted Donovan to assess was Riker’s trauma. It had been a shuttle crash that led Riker into Ferengi hands over a year ago. It wouldn’t be unreasonable to expect a touch of discomfort, even panic, inside a shuttle now.

But as they secured their cargo and headed back inside – as Riker guided the shuttle into the blackness of space again – he looked at home. The line of his shoulders was relaxed, his face smoothed out, starlight sparkling off his eyes. His hands flowed with the grace of a seasoned athlete over the controls; he worked the steering shift like an extension of his own body. If there was any residual trauma connected to being in the shuttle, Riker expertly concealed it.

And after they’d landed the shuttle and unloaded their cargo, as casually as could be, Riker intruded on Donovan’s private thoughts like a bulldozer.

“You know, I think I’m doing pretty damn good, considering my last two flights didn’t end so well,” Riker said with a grin.

Donovan’s shoulders tensed. He glanced sideways at Riker, on-guard for a tight argument.

“Two crash-landings right in a row,” Riker said.

“Yes. I saw the wreckage. Of the Romulan shuttle, I mean.”

Riker nodded. “If you remember when I took my first solo flight, you probably know how my skills matrix measured out.”

The skills matrix: a required test that every Starfleet cadet took, and which many put far too much stock in. Donovan’s had steered him away from command and into scholarship, but command had found him anyway. He thought back to Riker’s results, which he had indeed memorized.

“High marks in logic and engineering,” he said. “But your test administrator noted high levels of impulsivity, temper, rigid adherence to rules – a lack of creativity, but a good manner with other cadets. Natural leadership.”

“So I went ops, with a bead on command,” said Riker with a nod of acknowledgment.

“It doesn’t seem to be an accurate assessment,” said Donovan frankly.

“No?”

“I would rate you low on logic, high on creativity,” Donovan said. “I certainly would not make note of any rigid adherence to rules.”

Riker laughed. “What did I do to score so low on logic?”

Donovan shifted in his seat, a slight pause before he replied, “It’s just an impression.” He was beginning to regret his comments.

“Well, my point was just that I’m pretty good at shuttle maintenance,” Riker said, gently changing the topic – maybe because he noticed Donovan’s blush. “Growing up in Valdez, it helps to know a little something about mechanics. You rely on technology to keep you alive out there. If the climate control breaks, you gotta know how to fix it – and you better know how to build a warm shelter and a fire, too, just in case.”

Donovan nodded, thinking absently of Kallonia and its ‘primitive’ comforts, as his fellow officers had seen them. “I too scored high in engineering,” he said.

Kyle Riker had laughed at him when he learned that. He hadn’t believed it. Something about Donovan – his diminutive height, maybe, or his childishly light hair, or his polite mannerisms – had made it hard for Kyle to imagine him elbow-deep in engine grease. But Will Riker just

nodded again, like it was the most natural thing in the world. To Donovan, the Rikers were worlds apart in many ways.

"I'm pretty handy with a wrench," Riker said. "I've been in a few sticky situations where I had to do some battlefield repairs – I'd like to think I'm pretty good at it." He shrugged. "But I couldn't figure out that Romulan shuttle for the life of me."

Donovan stayed silent.

"I remember escaping from that ship," said Riker, his voice distant. "I didn't think I knew how to fly. So far as I remembered, I'd never done it before. But the controls made sense to me; it was instinctive. I was able to get the engines going, activate my shields, dodge a few parting shots." He punched a button on the dashboard, instructing the Enterprise to open her docking bay. "But all that knowledge faded when my adrenaline crashed. After I landed on Ipsand, I could never get it to come back. I worked on that shuttle for months and never figured out how to get it up and running again."

"Maybe you didn't want to leave," Donovan suggested, bracing himself for the reply.

Riker was in the middle of landing the shuttle, but he ripped his eyes away from the viewscreen to glance at Donovan, eyebrows raised. He guided the shuttle into the docking clamps by muscle memory. "Commander," he said, and his stammer returned, stealing his words for just half a second. He laughed at himself and shut the engines off. "Commander," he tried again, calmer now, "my options were to leave or to die there."

I know, Donovan thought, but he didn't say it aloud. He just offered Riker a pale smile and checked off the shuttle flight skills on his PADD. Riker's smile dropped. He searched Donovan's face, eyes darting, hands lax on the controls, and Donovan already regretted saying anything, wished he could take it back. Determined not to give anything else away, he showed Riker the PADD, with all his flight skills signed off.

"Good to go," he said.

It was near the end of Beta Shift, and according to Donovan's PADD, Counselor Troi's last patient had already left for the day. He circled the hallway a few times to make sure – just in case the session ran over. In his head, he replayed the day from that early-morning meeting in Picard's ready room all the way until now – a day filled with skills tests that would have offended any ensign, but that Riker went through with good cheer and aplomb.

He closed his eyes. He saw a fire on Kallonia, the flames licking color over Luvo's cloth-wrapped shins, the dirt blackening his fingernails – the scent of wine on his breath when he leaned close, their fingers hooking together when he tried to pull back. The heat of Luvo's body seared through the memory and left a flush of color on his skin.

Donovan concentrated all his mental energy on that image and collapsed it into a field of sparks. They descended, slow and hot, into his veins. He wasn't here to talk about Luvo. He was here to talk about Riker – about that moment in the meeting with Picard when Will Riker took Deanna's hand and smiled at her.

Welcome back, Will, she said.

Was he back? Really? His skills were fine. His demeanor was sound. But Donovan thought of Luvo and dug his fingernails into his palms. It felt too easy.

And he supposed only an empath would know the truth.

He forced himself to activate Deanna's door chime. He'd left Riker at Worf's, where the two were enthusiastically discussing which opera programme to load into the holodeck – Klingon, historical, with a real-life murder among the orchestra. Worf's door had let Riker in automatically; Deanna's too, the last time they were here.

And Donovan's tent on Kallonia had a protective field that he'd set to let Luvo in whenever he wanted – whenever he needed shelter. Whenever he wanted, except that last night. The night he threw Luvo out. Rejected. The night Luvo died. Abandoned.

Donovan turned on his heel, his heart hammering. He was halfway down the hall when Deanna's door hissed open.

"Commander?" she called, her voice gentle. Donovan froze, his hands clenched into fists. He forced himself to turn, to face her, and felt the muscles of his face tugging into a mask. Deanna just studied him, those wide black eyes threatening to pull him toward her. She stepped out of the doorway, gestured inside. "Would you like to come in?" she asked.

No escape now. Stiffly, Donovan made his way back like a prisoner walking straight to the firing squad. He brushed past Deanna, careful not to touch her, as if that might help box up the memories. A desperate war to contain the chaos was being waged. Donovan was losing this battle.

"I wanted to talk to you about Commander Riker," he said, relieved to hear his voice was steady.

"Oh?" Deanna circled him, one eyebrow raised. If he let her get the next word in, she'd have total control over the conversation. Donovan moved forward decisively and took a seat in Deanna's chair.

"It's about our meeting this morning," he said firmly.

Deanna cocked her head. Slowly, she sank into the patient's couch, studying Donovan all the while.

"As you know, I've been conducting Commander Riker's skill tests," Donovan said.

"And has he performed adequately?"

She was *amazing* at keeping her voice totally neutral. Donovan's eyes glinted with appreciation. "More than adequately," he admitted. "I'd heard he was the best pilot on the Enterprise...?"

"Don't let him hear you say that," said Deanna dryly.

"Well, I think it's still true, from what I've seen." Donovan bit his lip. He saw again Deanna's fingers hooked with Will's. "Counselor..."

Sensing the change in mood, Deanna took a slow, steady breath.

"He seems *fine*," Donovan said, trying to convey a thousand meanings in those three words. He reminded himself that empaths don't read minds.

"But you have reason to believe he isn't?" Deanna prompted.

How could she say that so calmly – discuss this like it didn't affect her? Donovan searched her face, suddenly uncertain.

"I'm asking you," he said. "Is he fine? Is there anything I should be aware of?"

He was usually great at reading faces, but if Deanna's expression shifted, it was so minute that Donovan couldn't tell.

"I'm not his counselor, Commander," Deanna said almost apologetically. "Have you spoken with his doctor?"

"I'm speaking to you," said Donovan. He kept his voice level and calm. "What do you sense from him?"

Silence.

"Is he ready for duty?"

Silence.

Then, slowly: "I would not have signed his release form if he weren't ready," Deanna said.

"Then why do I feel like there's something you're not telling me?"

Deanna's mask was perfect. When he stared into her eyes, all he saw was himself. With a sigh, Donovan drew himself up and prepped his last decent shot.

"Earlier today," he said, "in Picard's ready room, when you took Commander Riker's hand. What did you sense from him then?"

The only sign of life from Deanna was the slow rise and fall of her chest. Only gradually did she look down at her clasped hands. Her thumb ran over a ring on her index finger, the sort of complex alien jewelry that Starfleet officers loved to bring home to their spouses. Had she picked that out herself? Was it a gift? A souvenir?

"The truth is, Commander," said Deanna heavily, her eyes down, "I don't sense *anything* from Commander Riker."

Donovan stared at her. "Nothing?" he said as her gaze shifted uncomfortably. "You mean he doesn't *feel* anything at all – or do you mean he's blocked you out?"

"I mean that *I've* blocked *him* out," Deanna said, meeting Donovan's eyes. She pushed her breath out in a sigh. "When Commander Riker returned to the Enterprise, he was like a stranger to me. There was nothing familiar waiting for me in his mind."

"But now that he's gotten his memories back..."

"Perhaps it's different," Deanna acknowledged, her voice guarded. "But I didn't block him merely because I sensed a stranger. The level of self-hatred and pain coming from him was simply too much – even for a trained empath – to bear."

She kept her features fiercely composed as Donovan studied her.

"A stranger," he breathed. He scrubbed at the short hair at the back of his neck. He'd heard the two of them were lovers once. Something more. Something alien, Betazoid. Picard had told him a story early in his time on the Enterprise, about a solo mission Riker went on to a terraforming planet. When he was caught in an avalanche, Deanna Troi sensed it, even from light-years away. There was no one else she could sense like that; Donovan knew it because he'd asked her to do it himself, whenever his away teams got separated, to no avail.

"But he *is* the same man," Donovan said, just to make sure. He was no longer sure who he was trying to convince, himself or Deanna.

"Oh, yes," said Deanna, her voice soft and brittle. "Of that I'm sure. Commander..."

Donovan waited. He kept his face open, unguarded. He let her read him.

"After Kallonia," Deanna said, "did *you* ever return to being the same person? Or are you a stranger still?"

Donovan took a seat next to Geordi and grabbed the deck of cards while he waited, trying un-self-consciously to pull off a bridge shuffle. He'd never been good at it – his hands were too small, first of all, with a lack of dexterity that had plagued him ever since Kallonia, when he went to battle with the Bajoran electricity guns that always left his hand numb and tingling. The other issue was that, until the Enterprise, he'd had vanishingly few invitations to play cards at all. The setting was both uncomfortable and unfamiliar.

He cut the deck and took one small stack in each hand. Halfway through the bridge, as usual, the cards fluttered out of his control. Worf smacked his hand down on top of them as they sprayed across the table, catching a good chunk of the deck before it went too far.

“Sorry,” Donovan muttered.

He knelt beneath the table to gather everything that had spilled while the conversation went on overhead. He wished he could just stay there under the table, sheltered.

“Think he’s coming?” Geordi asked.

“*Of course* he is coming,” Worf rumbled. “I invited him.”

“Well, did he say yes?”

Donovan stretched out his arm to gather the last of the cards. Shoulders aching, he popped back up into his seat.

“Warriors do not require words to communicate,” said Worf stiffly.

Geordi parceled out the chips with a sigh. “So he didn’t say yes.”

“I think he’ll come, for what it’s worth,” Beverly chimed in. She’d been called in to replace Deanna, who’d been bawled out at their last match by O’Brien for using her empathic powers to cheat. And Donovan had been called in to replace O’Brien, who’d been bawled out for offending Deanna with his baseless accusations. The truth was, O’Brien just wasn’t great at poker.

“He’d been doing better lately,” Beverly continued. “He’s back to joking with me during his check-ups.”

Worf grunted in agreement. “We have resumed our regular meetings for morning calisthenics,” he said.

Donovan did a double-take at that, but weirdly, no one else at the table seemed surprised. He made a mental note to ask questions later.

“I mean, he seems better,” Geordi allowed. “But have any of us had anything more than surface interactions with him?” He angled his head toward Beverly. “What about Counselor Troi? Last I heard, they weren’t even speaking.”

A thick silence wrapped around them. Beverly shifted uneasily in her seat. She masked her discomfort with a quick, almost convincing smile. “Counselor Troi is just glad he cut his hair,” she said, her voice warm. “I don’t think she could handle the long flowing locks. Too much like Wyatt.”

A round of chuckles went across the table. Donovan made a note to ask about Wyatt later, too. He passed the deck of cards to Worf.

“Well, he’s officially late,” Geordi said. “Why don’t we get started?”

It was notable that no one suggested calling him. Worf dealt the cards with brutal precision; he had a habit of doling them out with so much strength that the cards were bent and creased. Donovan studied his hand, arranging the cards the way he liked them, by color rather than suit. A thick silence settled in between each player and hung over their heads like a wreath of smoke.

“Speaking of haircuts...” Geordi started, then hesitated. His fingers twitched as he contemplated whether to reorganize his cards. “I was there, actually, when Mr. Mott cut his hair.”

Slowly, every member of the poker party turned their heads, eyeing Geordi in silence.

“We caught each other in the hallway,” Geordi explained. “He just started chatting with me, asking about everyone in Engineering – it was just like old times, you know?”

Beverly nodded, her features suddenly fragile. At her side, Worf had lowered his head.

“And he was great with Mr. Mott,” Geordi went on. “I mean, really cheerful. Business-like. Same old Riker. But...”

Donovan kept his eyes firmly glued to his cards, his body rigid as he waited for Geordi’s words.

“But when he saw himself – I mean, when Mr. Mott handed him the mirror—”

“He did not like his haircut?” Worf interrupted gruffly. “I do not blame him. I have always contended that short hair is ... unmanly.”

“Worf,” Beverly chastised.

Geordi breathed a little easier, a half-smile tugging at his lips. “No, but – it’s probably nothing.” He plucked one card out of his hand and tucked it into place on the other side. “It’s just that he dropped the mirror when he saw himself. That’s all.”

Saw himself as Commander Riker. Saw himself as the Starfleet officer who’d been missing for over a year, rather than the drug-addled sex slave he’d become. Donovan stared unseeingly at his cards, a sour knot filling his stomach with acid. His desire to be there was even less than before.

“Probably nothing,” Worf agreed, and then the door opened with a hiss and Riker ducked inside, already grinning.

“Ready to lose?” he asked brightly.

Grumbles went up all around the table. Riker slid into the only empty seat and drummed his hands against the tabletop, unaware of – or

deliberately ignoring – the heavy mood. “Deal me in, Mister Worf!” he said eagerly.

The thick silence dissipated. Conversation sprang up naturally, easily – old friends catching up and teasing each other, Donovan fading into the shadows. Cards and chips scattered across the table, spilled drinks leaving dark stains on the velvet upholstery as they played.

And Riker, jovial and outgoing again, lost every hand.

Chapter 10

The blink of an incoming message roused Donovan from his half-asleep thoughts. He forced his numb limbs to unlock and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He'd been curled up for so long that he couldn't feel his feet – mind distant, blunt nails scratching idly at bare arms. He hit the 'receive' button and leaned in close, squinting through the light.

"Figured *you'd* answer me," said a familiar voice, "since my son can't be bothered. I hear he's been found?"

Donovan narrowed his eyes as the voice clicked into place. Kyle Riker. His gut tightened in that heavy, rock-hard way he remembered from adolescence: caused by his first solo mission, or by the hard glint in a commanding officer's eyes. Or by Kyle Riker. He hit the transmit button with a sigh.

"Donovan here," he said wearily.

"I know who I called," said Kyle with a hint of wry humor. "Give me a status update, kid. I conferenced with Admiral Ugwe and she tells me Will's not in the *brig*, so..."

At thirty-eight, it rankled a little to be called 'kid.'

"No charges have been brought against him," said Donovan calmly. Then, because it was infinitely more important than Riker's legal status: "You'll be glad to know Commander Riker is recovering from his injuries nicely. He was recently signed back to active duty."

"Injuries?" asked Kyle.

Donovan chewed the inside of his cheek. He elected not to respond.

"You want to clue me in?" Kyle asked. "What injuries?"

Damn it. Donovan kept his voice measured and professional. "Commander Riker's medical record is protected information, sir."

He expected a strained pause, a push for more, but Kyle moved on briskly.

"Well, I'd like to see him," he said. "My god, he's been missing for an entire year now! I think it's about time we met up."

Donovan leaned against his desk and picked at his cuticles. He wanted to see if the tension in Kyle's tone would snap.

"You're heading to Terras Four, yes?" Kyle asked.

"Yessir. Routine horticultural mission." Donovan paused, listening to the silence, and volunteered a little more. "Collecting fungus samples."

The height of boredom to a man like Kyle. When he spoke again, there was a tight line of frustration in his voice. But he sounded resigned.

"Alright, I'll join you. I assume you'll be stopping at Space Station Eighty-Three on the way there?"

It went without saying. They had a dozen crewmen and their families waiting for shore leave.

"I'll be there, then," Kyle said. Donovan reached for the 'off' button. "Hey, kid!"

Donovan paused. "Yes?"

"It's good talking to you again. Can't wait to catch up, hear all about Kallonia."

And he could tell just from his tone that Kyle was smiling.

Guinan had heard through the grape-vine that while half the crew sauntered off to Station 83 on shore leave, Will Riker was volunteering for extra shifts on the bridge. It wasn't hard to see why. From the bar in Ten-Forward, Guinan had a pretty good view of the problem: six feet tall, grey-haired and bull-faced, Kyle Riker was sitting at Will's favorite table, holding court.

Guinan studied him with hooded eyes. It was easy; he sensed her gaze, of course, but whenever he glanced her way, she just lowered her head and worked on drying her cocktail glasses. He knew it was a facade, but that was kind of the point – get him tense, rile him up, see how it changed him.

But first...

The gentle hum of warp engines kicked into gear beneath Guinan's feet. Her glass bottles vibrated against each other on the shelves, stopped only when she pressed a button and their velvet shields slotted into place. The *Enterprise* was on its way to Terras IV, then–

–and the door to Ten-Forward slid open, and Commander Will Riker stepped inside.

Across the room, Kyle Riker glanced at his son, and for a split second – despite the uniform, despite the haircut, despite the beard – there was no recognition on his face. Then his eyebrows twitched and he took a hasty gulp of synthehol to hide his reaction. Was it Guinan's imagination, or was there a new tinge of paleness to his jowls, a tremor in his fingers as he set his glass down?

"Will!" Kyle called with a smile, waving his son over.

Riker faltered. He was still too thin, too haggard – that, Guinan decided, was probably what made Kyle hesitate. But Riker rallied himself, and he forced a single step forward, and then suddenly his shoulders relaxed and a bright smile lit up his face. The game had begun.

“Dad,” he said simply, holding his hand out for a squeeze. Good grip, thought Guinan wryly; she could see Kyle’s forearm muscles tensing and Will’s knuckles going white from across the room. “How the hell are you?” Riker asked.

Kyle couldn’t hide his surprise at the warmth in Will’s voice. “Good,” he said. “Sit down – god’s sake, you look like a stiff wind could–”

The scrape of Riker’s chair against the floor drowned out the rest of Kyle’s sentence. Did he notice that his son didn’t sling a leg over the back of the chair when he sat? Not anymore. Not since he was rescued. Guinan had seen him pull that over-the-chair move a hundred times, sometimes to ease the pain in his lower back, but mostly, he did with as straight a face as possible to see if his shipmates would laugh.

“Well, how are you?” Kyle said as Guinan prepared one of Will’s favorite drinks at the bar, unasked. “I heard all about it from Donovan. He didn’t say where you’d been, just…”

“Yeah…” A grin tugged at the corner of Will’s lips. “Well, it was quite the adventure. Just about rivals the stories you used to tell me when I was a kid.”

“Oh? What stories are those?”

“You know – you’d come back from a mission and I’d hang off your arm asking all about it. Where’d you go, who’d you see… Remember that story you told me about the Orions?”

Kyle’s face lit up. He fought the grin on his face down to a self-satisfied smirk. Will leaned forward, his eyes dancing, and lowered his voice.

“It was a lot like your story with the Orions,” he whispered.

Kyle barked out a laugh. When Guinan came over with Will’s drink, the elder Riker scarcely seemed to notice her. Good. It gave her a chance to look Will in the eye, to ask him silently, with her disapproving expression, what the hell he was doing – why he was lying, or sort-of-lying – why the braggadocio, why the charm–

But Will took his drink and avoided her eyes. “Thanks, Guinan,” he said with a false note in his voice, intentionally locking her out of the conversation.

“Any time,” said Guinan softly. She lingered a moment later, just to get her message across, and then she drifted back to the bar. There weren’t many other patrons. No matter where she went, she could hear Will’s conversation, his stories about his year away.

His adventure.

“--best sex of my life,” Will said, and affected a look of innocent shock when the bystanders laughed. “I swear!”

“With a Ferengi?” said Kyle disbelievingly.

“I swear on my life! Don’t knock those ears until you try them–”

It was evening, and Ten-Forward was as lively as it ever got. A crowd of onlookers had gathered around Will’s table, listening to his stories even as his voice grew hoarse. Guinan didn’t like it, but she couldn’t blame them. For most of the crew, this was all they would ever hear about Commander Riker’s disappearance. Of course they wanted that information; of course they made for a willing, eager audience. Riker gave them what they wanted.

“Wait,” said Kyle, “so what happened with the Chandrilan fellow?”

“Oh, *that* guy.” Will sat back and pulled a face. “Let me tell you about that guy!”

He punctuated each sentence with a shot of synthehol. It wasn’t getting him drunk, Guinan could tell. He rode the line carefully: sober enough to keep his embellishments straight, drunk enough to numb the wounds and force himself to appreciate the spotlight. From a distance, she could tell his hands were shaking, his smile twitching around the edges. The facade was stretched to the limit.

“Tell me you’re going to put a stop to this,” she said out of the corner of her mouth.

In the shadows near the edge of the bar, Donovan’s expression flickered. He hadn’t realized Guinan could see him there; too used to sneaking around unnoticed, she supposed.

“What can I do?” Donovan asked, a little defensive. He took a hesitant step into the light.

“Go over there,” Guinan shrugged. “Tell him he’s wanted on the bridge.”

“It’s his *father*,” Donovan said. “He’s entitled to a reunion…”

“You’re right. And he’s clearly having so much fun. Isn’t he?”

Together, they watched as Will stood, nearly knocking back his chair as he made a wild gesture – arms swinging, face twisted in a mawkish grimace as he acted out whatever nonsense he’d made up about the vengeful Chandrilan. Who *was* the Chandrilan, really? In Will’s stories, he was a dirty abusive pimp, a caricature villain for a clever Starfleet officer to outsmart … or outrun. Will’s stories toed the line between Federation machismo and self-deprecating humor; his protagonist bumbled into bad situations and scrambled his way out. He told the stories

like he had watched the action from the sidelines, rather than lived it. But in real life, the Chandrilan – if he *was* real – might have been a friend. A business partner.

A client.

“No,” said Donovan softly. “He doesn’t look like he’s enjoying it.”

Guinan gave him an expectant look. She jerked her head meaningfully toward the Rikers, and with a grimace, Donovan trudged out there like a man going to war.

Interesting. She’d pegged him as Will’s protector. Why, when Kyle was here, did that status have to change? What power did he hold over Donovan?

Across the bar, Donovan inserted himself into the crowd. No one seemed to notice him there, not among the gathered officers – but Kyle’s smile became fixed, his shoulders tight, and when Donovan put a gentle hand on Will’s arm, the commander’s voice faltered and died. He looked down at Donovan, lips parted, face suddenly white. The blue lights of Ten-Forward danced over his pale skin. The game was over.

“The captain would like your assistance on Deck Eight,” Donovan said levelly.

For a heartbeat longer, Riker just stared at him. Then his forearm flexed beneath Donovan’s hand and he nodded. That easy smile slid across his face as he said his goodbyes, but he didn’t make eye contact with any of the people gathered there.

And he forgot to say goodbye to Kyle when he left.

“Deck Eight?” Riker asked casually as soon as he and Donovan cleared Ten-Forward.

Donovan grimaced. Obviously, the captain would never call Riker for assistance on Deck Eight – Deck Eight was purely crew quarters and recreation. But Kyle Riker wasn’t likely to know the exact layout of the Enterprise, and even if he did ... most people would assume there was some secret they weren’t party to, some hush-hush official reason for Riker to leave.

“Counselor Troi said you might want an out,” Donovan said.

Riker’s eyes tightened. “Counselor Troi said that?”

“Yes,” Donovan lied blandly.

“Then I assume we’re not just going to my quarters?” asked Riker, looking amused now. “Counselor Troi’s office is also on Deck Eight.”

“Well, I never said we were going to your quarters,” Donovan said. He shot Troi a quick message on his handheld, praying that she was free. He kept his face blank as he did it, but he sensed Riker studying him, searching every feature for signs of a break. His charade was about to be blown.

“You know,” said Riker finally, “I don’t think Counselor Troi would approve a session right after I pulled a triple shift.”

“If you keep pulling triples, then she has no choice,” said Donovan, but he knew he’d lost Riker already. He was just going through the motions.

“I don’t think she’d mandate a session, either. She’s not my counselor.”

“It’s not mandatory,” said Donovan begrudgingly.

Riker stopped walking. He tilted his head to the side, looking down at Donovan expectantly. Like a commander waiting for a wayward ensign to explain himself. Donovan couldn’t help but smile, and he was lucky Riker was the type of guy who liked to see his shipmates smile.

“Okay,” Donovan sighed as he continued. “Commander, your behavior in Ten-Forward concerns me.”

The vague way Riker’s face had lit up at the sight of Donovan’s grin faded. “I don’t believe there was anything untoward about my behavior...” he said leadingly.

“I didn’t say untoward, sir. I said *concerning*.”

The smile came back, feigned this time. “If my behavior concerned you, put it in a report, Donovan.”

Donovan clenched his teeth. After a year of serving on the Enterprise, he could see clearly how some of his crewmembers might respond to this jab – Counselor Troi, Worf, La Forge. But *they* were Riker’s friends; *he* was Riker’s replacement. He was the outsider.

And Riker had just pointedly reminded him of that. When Riker barged onto the bridge all those weeks ago in his pajamas, who reported him? Not Troi, not Worf. Stiffly, professionally, Donovan said,

“Starfleet integrity, sir.” He waited for the words to sink in. “It’s something we all vow to uphold upon acceptance to the Academy. I hope you display more of it on our upcoming mission.”

“What mission?” Riker asked, eyes narrowed.

Donovan handed him the slim handheld PADD he’d been carrying around. “You’ve been approved to go planetside on the next away team, collecting fungal samples from Terras Four.”

Riker scrutinized the PADD, his expression unchanging. “It’s not a matter of Starfleet integrity,” he said, distractedly continuing the conversation, even as his face softened. Orders, away teams – that was bound to lighten his mood no matter what Donovan accused him of.

“What is it, then?” Donovan asked. “All I heard was you lying to your father about the year you went AWOL. You made it sound like an adventure. A vacation.”

“And how exactly do you know I was lying?” Riker asked, glancing up from the PADD.

Because I saw you naked, dying, Donovan thought. *Because I saw your scars.*

But he kept his professional mask in place and let Riker study him. Slowly, Riker stepped forward, and when he handed the PADD back to Donovan, it tapped lightly against Donovan’s chest.

“Maybe I did enjoy it,” Riker said softly, watching Donovan for a reaction.

Ambivalently, Donovan said, “Everyone enjoys an adventure, sir.”

A line appeared between Riker’s eyebrows. “Don’t call me ‘sir,’” he said, stepping back. “You’re first officer, Commander. Not me.”

“Aye, sir.”

The fight had gone out of him; he didn’t look weary, just lost, like his interest in the argument had fled all at once and left him cold. And he didn’t protest the second time Donovan called him ‘sir’. He just nodded, lips twisting in a humorless imitation of a smile. His eyes stayed distant, locked somewhere between Deanna’s office and his own quarters.

In this space, halfway between first officer and friend, Donovan awkwardly clasped Riker’s hand.

“I’ve read a lot about your missions,” he said gruffly.

“I’ve read a lot about yours,” Riker said, jerked back to the present with his eyebrows raised.

“Well, I’m looking forward to working with you. That’s all.” With a quick, rough shake, Donovan let go of Riker’s hand – and watched a real smile, slow and easy, take the place of that hollow ghost from earlier.

“We’ll be the very best mushroom pickers in Starfleet,” Riker assured him.

Donovan nodded. When he left, there was a spring in his step, part-real, part-affected. But he was very aware – how could he not be? – that he left Riker behind, still caught between the counselor’s office and his bedroom, still staring distantly at the floor.

Chapter 11

Riker was waiting in the transporter room when Donovan arrived, one pair of plastoid gloves dangling from his clenched teeth while he adjusted the bulky sample shelf strapped to his back. When he caught sight of Donovan, he yanked the gloves out of his mouth and used them to wave hello. Dr. Yazzi, a small-boned guest from the mycology department on Station 83, flitted around Riker and tugged at the buckles over his chest.

"I feel like a workhorse," he complained, a sparkle in his eyes.

"Commander Donovan is too small to carry a pack," said Dr. Yazzi. "As am I. The mushrooms themselves aren't likely to weigh much, but the pack is made of a sterilized glass frame—"

"Glass?" Donovan said, eyebrows raised.

Dr. Yazzi glanced sideways at him. "Six months ago, an unmanned Federation scout ship got caught in an ionic storm and crashed to the surface of Terras Four. Five months later, the titanium frame was completely gone. The only thing left were the glass windows."

"Gone?" Donovan said, one eyebrow raised. "I thought Terras Four was deserted."

"It is," said Riker with a grin.

"Then who scavenged it?"

"No one did," said Dr. Yazzi, and her serious face cracked into a smile to match Riker's. Excitement glimmered in her eyes. "The mushrooms ate it."

"Ate it?" Donovan said, unable to hold back a smile – and a spark of anticipation.

"That's our theory. It's called biosorption. If we're right, we can use the mycelia of these fungi to break down heavy metals left behind on Cardassian colonies where they set up shipyards." Dr. Yazzi tapped the screen built into Riker's backpack to check the temperature inside. Cardassian colonies! Donovan thought. Now there was a remediation project worth undertaking. He circled Riker with a new bounce in his step, examining the backpack in more detail.

"Is this pack refrigerated?" Donovan asked, eyeing the blue tubes that circulated inside the glass.

"Yes," said Riker.

"Isn't that cold?" asked Donovan, concerned.

"Yes," said Riker, and he rolled his shoulders slightly, flinching when the cool glass touched the back of his neck. But he was still grinning, too excited about his first away mission to let the drawbacks get to him. "Who else is on the away team?" he asked.

Donovan turned to his PADD with a frown. "From the Enterprise, just us," he said. "From Station Eighty-Three, two mycologists in addition to Doctor Yazzi. And as a consultant and guest—"

The door slid open, admitting one towering woman the same height as Riker. At her side was her fellow mycologist, a slim elderly fellow who would buckle under the weight of a sample collection pack. And behind them, already strapped into a pack of his own...

"Dad," said Riker, his smile fading.

"I thought I'd join the fun," said Kyle Riker, adjusting his straps. The tall mycologist lifted the glass shelving for him so he could tighten the buckles. She wore a pack of her own, bringing their sample collection group up to three.

"Are you cleared for combat?" Riker asked his father.

"If I can beat your ass in anbo-jytsu, then I can handle myself in a fight," Kyle said. Riker's forehead creased; his gaze followed Kyle around the transport room.

"You cheat at anbo-jytsu," he said.

"Commander Riker?"

He looked down at Dr. Yazzi, eyebrows still furrowed.

"It's not a combat mission," Yazzi reminded him. "If combat readiness is a requirement, then I and my fellow mycologists must step down."

Donovan and Riker flashed each other a concerned look.

"Even you?" said Donovan to the tall woman, whose biceps were practically bursting out of her shirt.

"Haven't put in my combat hours lately," she said with a shrug.

Donovan scratched the back of his neck, faintly embarrassed for the four civilians. He edged closer to Riker and pulled out his PADD, angling the screen so only they could see. Together, they studied the orders for this mission and the planet specs.

“Wildlife,” Riker murmured.

“Small animals only,” Dr. Yazzi said. “We’ve been observing them for months.”

Donovan chewed the inside of his cheek. With a subtle raise of the eyebrow, Riker skimmed one hand down to his own hip and tapped his phaser. Fair point, Donovan thought. He nodded his approval while Riker carefully hefted his glass backpack and shook hands with the newcomers.

“You must be Guirguis,” he guessed, assessing the tall woman. “The Parrises Squares champion, right?”

“Right,” she said with a dangerous-looking grin.

To the elderly man, Riker said, “And you must be Doctor Hsu; I was up all night reading your paper on bioremediation.”

Dr. Hsu’s eyes lit up as he shook Riker’s hand. Kyle Riker gravitated to the group, effortlessly joining the conversation while Dr. Yazzi did a final check of their equipment. Donovan stood on the sidelines, unable to separate the three threads of voices – Guirguis and Kyle with their discussion of martial arts; Riker and Hsu with their debate about plastic-eating fungi; Dr. Yazzi gracefully interjecting here and there, always receiving a response.

Donovan, tongue-tied, just nodded when the transport chief asked if they were ready. They took to the pads, everyone else still talking, a quiet clatter of glass backpacks and easy conversation. Then the molecular tingle crept up their spines and through their skin, freezing them in place.

The voices faded.

Donovan opened his eyes on Terras IV.

The earth beneath Donovan’s feet was thick and white. He blinked, inhaling dust – no, inhaling spores – and clamped a hand over his mouth.

“It’s okay,” Riker murmured, his eyelids low as he studied his PADD. White spores clung to his lashes. “It’s safe to breathe.”

It didn’t *feel* safe. A rasping cough settled in Donovan’s throat as he inhaled. Beside him, Riker scraped his foot over the ground and raised an eyebrow as the whiteness crumbled. Wet strands of it clung to Riker’s sole.

“Mycelia,” said Dr. Yazzi. “The roots of a mushroom.” She knelt and brushed her gloves over the soil. “It must be very fertile – totally colonized, yet totally exposed to the air...”

Guirguis rattled her glass backpack, and as if hearing some voiceless command, Dr. Hsu reached inside the shelving for a petri dish. While he and Yazzi collected a sample, Donovan and Riker raised their tricorders, scanning the area for threats.

“Some small scattered lifeforms to the north,” Riker said quietly.

Donovan had noticed the same thing. But that was all. He tucked his tricorder away and glanced around, allowing himself to see the beauty of the mushroom forest for the first time. Lush vegetation covered every centimeter of land. Where the great trees had fallen, rot-blackened logs remained, their surfaces peppered with soft shelves of polypore mushrooms. Insects buzzed over the sweet fruit of a broken fungus, their proboscides dipping into the open pores, where an amber substance almost like honey oozed out from the mushroom’s stem. Riker moved silently through the brush, his head on a swivel; he stopped to examine the bright orange globules of a slime mold even as Donovan drew up short, enraptured by the luminescent blue fingers of a fungus that pushed through the fallen leaves.

“Donovan?” said Riker softly.

Donovan glanced up and found Riker handing him a knife, blade-first. Deftly, Donovan flipped it over and crouched down next to the sample Riker had found.

“It matches the description from Dr. Hsu’s paper,” Riker said. “I’d get it myself, but...”

He bent his knees a little, demonstrating how the glass cabinet strapped to his back rattled when he tried to kneel. Donovan huffed out a laugh and pressed the knife blade to the mushroom’s stem, right where it disappeared into the earth. It was a sturdy little thing, the color of pale flesh, with a cap spanning the length of Donovan’s hand. When he turned it over, the underside was lined not with gills but with a thousand tiny holes, each one smeared with a sticky orange substance.

“Those are the spores,” said a voice behind them. Donovan turned to see Kyle and Yazzi picking through the brush. Yazzi brushed her hair back and said, “Most theories point to the mycelia doing the hard degradation work, but there are a few fringe theorists who focus on the spores themselves.”

“Really,” said Donovan. She plucked the mushroom from his hands.

“Watch,” she said.

She bit one of her plastoid gloves off and set it on the forest floor. With her other hand, she squeezed the mushroom cap between thumb and forefinger, its pores pointed straight at the glove. As Donovan watched, a dribble of orange goo dripped onto the plastoid glove...

...and burned right through it.

Donovan’s expression twitched. He caught Riker pursing his lips to bite back a laugh at how close they’d come to losing their fingers.

“This is another reason why we put our samples in glass,” said Yazzi with a grin. She placed the depleted, slightly crooked mushroom cap into Riker’s cupboard, the lone specimen on the top shelf. Beside her, Kyle’s backpack was significantly more full.

“You look queasy, Donovan,” he said lightly.

Donovan got his face back under control. “No, sir.”

“Remember when we were stationed together,” Kyle continued as Dr. Yazzi pushed on, “and I told you that story about the Tholians?”

Oh, yes, Donovan remembered. Kyle had been the sole survivor of a Tholian attack, and he’d worn his healed wounds like a badge of honor. Back then, the stories of burn blisters and dead skin had turned Donovan’s stomach purely from lack of experience. Now, he thought of the Battle of Jawal, the bodies swelling beneath a hot Kallonian sun, and had to struggle not to scowl. As he hiked after Yazzi, he heard Riker say,

“Leave him alone, Dad.”

But Donovan was determined not to think about it. He tuned out the rising argument behind him and crouched beside Dr. Yazzi, still holding Riker’s knife.

“Check this one out,” Dr. Yazzi murmured. A slight smile tugged at her lips, her hands hovering over a bulbous blue specimen not unlike a gravball.

“That’s a mushroom?” asked Donovan softly.

“On Earth, we’d probably classify it as a puffball,” Yazzi said. “Ball-shaped fungi that burst on impact. They keep their spores inside, but when they’re broken…”

She used her own knife to slice the flat surface of the blue puffball. Inside, a spongy flesh flexed and coughed, releasing a cloud of white dust not unlike the spores Donovan inhaled when they beamed down. He held his breath and inched away.

“You don’t like mushrooms?” asked Yazzi, sounding amused.

“On the contrary. I think they’re delicious.” *When cooked*, he added mentally.

“Would it surprise you to learn that I don’t care for the taste?” Yazzi smiled. “Never have. But in pure scientific terms…”

Fascination glinted in her dark eyes as she pried open the wound she’d made in the mushroom’s flesh. Donovan stood, his knees creaking, and glanced back the way he came. Guirguis and Hsu had joined the Rikers, watching the father-son spat with alarm.

“I should break that up,” said Donovan wearily.

Yazzi paid him no mind. He took one step back, just as Kyle threw his hands up in exasperation and marched Donovan’s way, maybe intending to apologize. He shoulder-checked Riker as he walked, and their glass backpacks rattled. Quick as a whip, Guirguis jumped forward, catching Kyle’s cabinet door as it swung open, the latch springing apart. Empty petri dishes shattered on the forest floor, but most of the specimens were caught, albeit squished.

Chagrined, Kyle and Guirguis knelt to scoop up the petri dishes.

“I thought it was closed,” Kyle said, looking more humiliated than Donovan had ever seen him.

“It was,” Guirguis assured him. “That fat polypore you collected just nudged the latch, that’s all. It could happen to anyone.”

Hsu gave Donovan an awkward wave as he entered the clearing. “Should you be touching that?” Donovan asked, eyeing the slivers of broken glass.

“It’s fine,” Kyle grumbled.

“If these fungi are so good at biosorption, maybe you should just leave it here.”

“It’s glass,” said Guirguis impatiently. “They can’t absorb glass.”

“Right,” said Donovan, abashed. Guirguis had a small handful of shards now, and a few fresh tears in her gloves. As she stood up, Riker gently took her hand and studied the tiny cuts that lined her fingers.

“You should get back to the ship,” he said, smearing an upswell of blood from her fingertips.

“Sir, I—”

“He’s right,” Donovan cut in. “Any open wound could get contaminated. Mr. Riker—?”

Kyle stood up with a scowl. “No cuts,” he said, presenting his hands. Guirguis’ face twisted into something like a pout, and Riker shot her an understanding grin.

“Go see Doctor Crusher,” he advised, still holding her hand. “She’ll fix you right up and you’ll be back in Mushroom Heaven in no time.”

Reluctantly, Guirguis turned to go. Riker wiped her blood on his thigh and nodded to Dr. Hsu.

“Go with her,” he said. “Just in case something goes wrong.”

“Oh, for...” Grumbling lightly, Dr. Hsu marched off after her. Riker and Donovan watched, each of them flanking Kyle, as the pair cleared the trees and waited for a beam up. As soon as their forms sizzled out of existence, the three onlookers turned away.

“Hey, fellas?” Dr. Yazzi called.

Donovan’s eyes sharpened. Something in her tone struck him right in the gut.

“Yes?” Riker called, even as they pushed through the brush to reach her side.

She wasn’t where Donovan had left her. She’d moved on by several meters, nearly out of sight, to a crop of man-sized mushrooms climbing up the trunk of a massive tree. Yazzi took a careful step back, her eyes trained on something Donovan couldn’t see.

It was Kyle who put a hand on his arm and stopped him. Riker kept going, just a few steps, and then he stopped too, reaching out with his long arms to grab Yazzi and pull her sharply to safety. The enormous mushrooms circled the tree like rope vines, and as Donovan watched, the pores lining the underside of each sprawling cap seemed to pulse. The holes widened, the darkness inside them growing a little brighter, a little sharper, until it was undeniably clear that something was nestled deep inside, waiting to come out.

“It’s acidic,” said Dr. Yazzi softly, barely breathing. “And I think it’s triggered by movement.”

Silence. The four of them watched as the caps seemed almost to breathe, pores expanding and narrowing. Bright fuzzy spores released like snowflakes on the exhale, hovering in the air overhead. Donovan picked a particularly thick clump to track with his eyes, and when that clump descended on a nearby bramble, the thorns sizzled and curled in on themselves like burnt strands of hair.

“Okay,” said Kyle calmly, the weight of authority in his voice. “Slowly. Doctor, you first.”

She didn’t move immediately. Riker’s grip on her arms tightened, and very slowly, he maneuvered her past him, away from the giant mushrooms. The caps pulsed again, as if sensing her movement.

Kyle’s eyes flicked to Donovan, a silent order for him to go next. Why? Because he was the smallest, with Yazzi gone – and smaller people had a better chance of getting away untracked? It made sense, but his heart clenched, screaming at him not to leave his men behind. He watched another burst of acidic spores release into the air and took a slow step backward, keeping his arms and torso still.

As he retreated past Riker, he saw the bright smear of Guirguis’ blood on Riker’s trousers. He remembered the small creatures on the tricorder – wild beasts located on the north side of the forest. *This* side of the forest.

He didn’t have time to piece a coherent thought together before he heard it snuffling. Kyle and Riker came to a silent agreement, stepping backward in unison to join Donovan’s retreat, and somewhere behind the giant mushrooms, a living creature sniffed deeply, rapidly, and scraped its claws against the tree.

“Phasers,” said Donovan through clenched teeth. He used Riker’s body to shield himself, twisting his fingers in Kyle’s sleeve. “You. Go.”

Kyle clenched his jaw and stayed where he was.

“You don’t have a phaser,” Donovan hissed.

Kyle and Riker took another simultaneous step back, forcing Donovan to move too. He kept his grip on Kyle’s sleeve and yanked hard, the movement hidden by Riker’s broad back.

“My son,” said Kyle calmly, “is slathered in that woman’s blood. I’m not running away and leaving him to some—”

Riker swept his arm out in a sudden, sharp blow. It landed across Kyle’s chest and sent him stumbling backward, straight into Donovan. The glass cabinet rattled and fell open again, pouring its fungal contents onto the forest floor. Donovan tripped over them, breaking the soft flesh and releasing multicolored clouds of spores – and at the same time, Kyle reached for him, half-using him for balance and half-pushing him to safety – and Riker raised his phaser, and through the trees, through the acidic giant mushrooms with their shivering caps, came a beast.

It was small. Its flesh was hairless, smooth like leather. Its mouth was packed with needle-sharp teeth. It had no eyes, only nostrils, wide and cavernous.

And wherever the acidic spores landed, they sizzled, raising bright red sparks, but they didn’t burn this creature at all.

“Acid-resistant,” said Riker softly. “Of course.”

That was all he managed to say. Before Donovan could raise his phaser, before he could run, the creature leapt for them, plunging straight through the tall mushrooms and kicking up a cloud of acidic spores. Riker lunged forward with a snarl and caught the creature’s claws across his chest even as his phaser whined and pushed the little ratlike beast backward. A plume of acidic dust kicked up and the creature scabbled to its feet again, back on the attack. Needle teeth plunged into Riker’s arm – acid descended on his uniform, and he ducked his head and hurled the beast up over his face for protection, exposing himself to the biting claws rather than face the corrosive liquid gelling onto his clothes—

And Kyle grabbed him by one shoulder, and Donovan grabbed him by the other, and the flimsy blade of the mushroom-hunting knife plunged into the creature’s gaping nose.

Donovan’s heartbeat filled his ears. He heard the squeal of animal pain, saw it stumble away, but all he was really conscious of was the weight of Will Riker’s body falling back on him, the bared teeth and the eyes squeezed closed, the acid eating into his skin. Instinct took over. Kyle hurled his glass backpack to the ground and knelt at his son’s side, dragging him far away from the acid-spewing mushrooms. On the other side of Will’s body, Donovan used his gloved hands to tear at the burning uniform, words spilling from his mouth.

"It's okay," he said, and he heard his own voice as a floating sound, calm and distant. Across from him, Kyle cut into Will's belt with the blood-soaked foraging knife and tore the uniform free. Acid had already eaten through much of the fabric, burning away Will's chest hair and chewing holes in his flesh.

"Ahh—" Will said, more a groan than a word, his voice collapsing in on itself. As the uniform was stripped away, his old scars came into view: whip lashes and brands, shiny-smooth scars and ugly keloids. Kyle froze, his eyes tracking over each one.

"Shh, shh," Donovan said. There was an ugly near-castration scar on the side of Riker's sex, and he reached instinctively to cover it from Kyle's prying eyes. He placed his palm over it, weathered through the jerk of Riker's body as he flinched away. With his other hand, Donovan tugged his own uniform top off and whipped it over Riker's groin. As if waking from a trance, Kyle hurried out of his own jacket and eased Will into a sitting position, wrapping the jacket around his torso for warmth.

"We've got you," Donovan said, clasping Riker's hand. "Kyle—"

Kyle smacked his combadge, almost missing it entirely. "Three to sickbay!" he barked.

Riker's grip on Donovan's hand was hard enough to hurt, his skin slick with blood. Jaw clenched, he glanced down his own body and quickly turned his face away, burying his head against his father's shoulder.

He reached down and adjusted the uniform top just as the beam froze him in place. Seconds later, the light faded and Donovan blinked against the harsh overheads of sickbay. He squeezed Riker's hand even as he scooted away, letting the medics rush in. Kyle stayed where he was, refusing to budge from Will's side.

A swarm of nurses blocked Donovan's view. The sound of Riker's pained breathing filled his ears – almost silent gasps, never crossing the line into a moan or whimper. Kyle was nudged firmly away, his face tight, and he watched closely as three of the medics held Riker's limbs in place while a fourth ran over the acid wounds with a regenerator. Riker's chest rose and fell in a quick, deep breath, his lungs stuttering, the curls of dark hair on his chest matted with blood.

"Alright?" asked Kyle, his voice gruff.

"Fine," Riker managed between clenched teeth. A second later, the last of the wounds knitted itself together and the medics moved in with alcohol swabs, wiping the last remnants of acid and blood away. Riker's muscles relaxed, his head tipping back against the floor.

"Can we get him off the ground, please?" Kyle said, just the right side of a snap. The medics acquiesced without a word. They hauled Riker to his feet – bare skin slipping on the tile floor – and Donovan hurried into the fray, one hand on Riker's waist, the other between his shoulders. With the medics, he guided Riker to the nearest bed and propped him up on the edge.

"A painkiller, sir," one of the medics said, leaning in with a hypospray. Donovan tensed, unsure if he should deny it. But Riker himself reached up, casually, with his eyes closed, and pushed the hypo away. He took a weary breath and leaned hard against Donovan's shoulder, his breath a warm cloud on Donovan's skin.

"Thanks," he said, barely audible. He still clasped Donovan's uniform top over his groin, his grip loose from weariness. The adrenaline crash looked like it had almost wiped him out. Donovan's heart skipped a beat, hyper-aware of Riker's lips dragging against the bare skin of his shoulder – he cast a quick glance toward Kyle and caught him glaring, his face dark. With a gentle shrug, Donovan moved Riker away.

"Don't mention it," he said, steadying Riker before he stepped back. He gestured for one of the medics to bring him a blanket. "I'll get a fresh uniform for you. Or civilian clothes?"

Riker brushed a hand over one of the healing acid wounds and winced at the tenderness of the skin. "Civilian clothes," he confirmed with a grimace. "Loose."

Donovan wheeled away. There was a general-use replicator in the waiting room, out of Riker's sight. He'd already punched in Riker's measurements when he sensed someone approaching from behind. He recognized the quiet footfalls, the distribution of weight. Kyle.

"Those were quite some scars," Kyle murmured.

Donovan kept his eyes on the read-out screen. He stepped back as a beam of light appeared in the replicator tray, knitting together a set of civilian clothes so loose they were practically pajamas.

"Castration?" Kyle asked.

"Clearly not successful," said Donovan a bit stiffly, shifting position as Kyle was clearly violating his personal space.

"Oh, you noticed that?" said Kyle, his voice too light as he leaned in.

What was he trying to imply? He'd noticed the scar, too. Donovan touched the clothes, discovered they were cold, and set the replicator to warm them up. It would help combat the symptoms of shock, if there were any. Behind him, Kyle circled Donovan, edging a little closer.

"When a man is in *control* of his mission," said Kyle, voice low, "he doesn't come back with scars like those."

Donovan said nothing. He touched the clothes again and found them warm enough to serve.

"What really happened while he was missing?" Kyle said. "He's been lying to me, hasn't he?"

"Mr. Riker, that is a question for your son." But Donovan's stomach tightened when he imagined Kyle interrogating Will about it. He hesitated, the clothes folded in his arms. "Ask him later. Give him a chance to recover."

Kyle, to his surprise, actually laughed. “You don’t know us Riker boys very well, Lieutenant Commander. He *has* recovered. I’ll ask him now.”

“Sir, he—”

“Is he dying?” asked Kyle pointedly. “Are his wounds healed?” Kyle moved to block Donovan’s path.

Donovan pursed his lips. He searched Kyle’s face and saw a glint of desperation in his eyes. He remembered the Tholians, how Kyle had bragged far and wide about the speed of his recovery, the extent of his wounds. How he’d relished beating the younger men on a long march or a feat of strength, as if it proved something.

“I just stood in there and watched the medics run a regenerator over his wounds,” said Kyle. “That means he’s recovered. The Riker boys don’t need a long debrief, Donovan.”

By ‘debrief’ Donovan supposed he meant such unmanly things as ‘recovery periods’ or ‘rest’ or ‘psychological evals’. He brushed past Kyle, his jaw tight, determined to deliver the fresh clothes before they cooled down. Kyle followed close behind. By the time they reached Riker’s bed, Kyle had liberated the clothes from Donovan’s arms.

“Let me help you,” he said to Riker, his voice brusque.

Donovan almost protested, but Riker submitted to his father’s help with a grunt. With surprising gentleness, Kyle guided his arms through the shirtsleeves and his head through the collar, one hand tugging the hem down over Riker’s bare stomach. His palm skimmed over one of Riker’s scars, maybe accidental – maybe not. But either way, it resulted in a flinch.

“Quite the scar,” Kyle said conversationally. Donovan leaned against the wall, arms crossed, as Kyle helped Riker into his pants. “You neglected to mention those in your stories.”

“Did I?” asked Riker.

“Yes.” Kyle slid Riker’s sleeve up and turned his wrist, exposing the tattoo of a Ferengi hammer. “This too. Interesting design.”

Riker jerked his hand out of Kyle’s grip.

“Well, no matter.” Kyle slipped his hands into his pockets and sat on the edge of Will’s bed. “I wouldn’t want to talk about it either, tell you the truth. And in my experience, *talking* isn’t much help.”

“That why you never told me about the Tholians?” asked Riker, pulling his knees up to his chest.

“That, and it wasn’t any of your business,” said Kyle lightly. “We weren’t speaking at the time, remember?”

“I was seventeen,” said Riker, voice bland.

Kyle patted Riker’s leg. “If you don’t dwell on it, you’ll get over it faster,” he said. “Trust me. Maybe have the doctors take a look at those scars – I’m sure Kate can catch a transport here if you need a scar removal expert. She’s the best of the best.”

Riker stared down at Kyle’s hand on his leg. With dead eyes, he laid back on the mattress, his facial expressions shut off. “I’ll look into it,” he said.

Kyle peered down at Riker so closely that it made Donovan’s skin crawl. He flexed his hands into fists.

“Will,” said Kyle softly, chidingly, “it’s been a month. It’s time to let this go, don’t you think?”

Riker said nothing.

“By the time my physical wounds were healed, do you think I wanted to lie in bed and mope about the Tholians?” Kyle asked. “I lost everyone I knew on Station 311. Did I let it stop me from reaching my goals?”

Donovan grit his teeth and stepped forward. He came around the other side of Will’s bed, giving him an excuse to look away from Kyle. Will’s gaze called out to him, strained and begging for help.

“Commander,” said Donovan firmly, “it will take you some time to get back on your feet. That’s only natural.” He could see Kyle bristling, so he pointedly gestured toward Will’s body, to the fresh acid burns still marring his skin. “I’ll network with Doctor Crusher to see when we can expect you back, but I imagine she’ll want you to rest—”

Kyle pushed to his feet, a frisson of tension in the air.

“--and run some tests--” Donovan continued.

“He’s *fine*,” Kyle said.

“Sir, we are discussing his acid injuries,” said Donovan evenly. “As a member of the command team—”

“Tell him, Will,” said Kyle, exasperated. He gestured to Donovan and waited for Will to back him up, but Riker’s hands were twisted in the fabric over his stomach, his eyes fixed dully on the ceiling. “Rikers don’t give up that easy,” Kyle said. “If he says he’s good to go, then he’s good to go.”

“He *hasn’t* said--” Donovan started.

“Give him a damn chance to speak and he will!”

Donovan fought for patience. Keeping his voice calm, he said, “Mr. Riker, recovery doesn’t happen in a matter of minutes—”

“Oh, what the hell would you know about recovery?” Kyle burst, rounding the foot of the bed. “What do you know about physical strength, Donovan? I remember you before you had that damn rank to hide behind and I doubt you ever lifted anything heavier than a *book*.”

The sheer venom in his voice rendered Donovan speechless. He blanched, running backward through his memory to see where he’d miscalculated – which signs he’d failed to read. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Will wince, eyes closed tight against a lance of pain, and searched for a way to de-escalate.

“My apologies for overstepping,” he said. “I only meant—”

“*Overstepping?*” Kyle snapped. “How about butting in where you don’t belong? Let me ask you something, you ever play nursemaid to the woman you love while she rots in a hospital bed? You ever wake up in a slaughterhouse with a Tholian heat-gun aimed right at your gut?”

At a loss for words, Donovan did the only thing he could. He backed out of the room. Alone now, Kyle huffed to himself, still agitated, his color high. Will’s head pounded, a lance of pain entirely unrelated to his injuries.

“That was out of line,” he said, his voice low.

Kyle shot him an absent glance. His eyes fell on Will’s hands, white-knuckled and sweating where he grasped at his pajama shirt. “You alright, son?”

“That was out of line,” Will repeated, louder this time, the full weight of command in his voice. He forced his weak muscles to move, sitting up with a pained gasp for breath. “Donovan is *my* crewman, not yours. If you think he needs disciplined, you don’t do it yourself. You come to me.”

Kyle tipped his head back, exasperated. “Because *you’re* in prime condition to do it. You can barely sit up!”

Will leaned heavily on his elbows, his vision blurred. Ice traveled down his chest to his groin and turned his hands numb. When Kyle approached the bed, he towered over Will, as tall as he’d seemed when Will was a little kid – and suddenly Will *was* a little kid, half-listening to Kyle in the present as he ranted about Donovan, half-listening to a scene decades earlier. Will, as a child, too tired for another session of anbo-jytsu. His mother calling out from her daybed: *Kyle, leave him alone!* And Kyle’s sneer, a half-remembered comment about Mom’s frailty, her endless naps, lying on that bed all day being catered to like a queen—

What do you know about resilience, Elisabeth? What do you know about physical strength?

“He’s a lieutenant commander and he’s a member of my goddamn crew,” Will said, his voice low and shaking. “I’m not going to let a civilian consultant drag my crew’s wellbeing to the ground. You want to exorcise your demons, you want to prove your masculinity, do it on someone else.”

Kyle went silent. He took a step forward, placating this time, but as soon as he was within reach, Will’s thin grasp on calmness snapped. He surged forward, past the pain in his ribs, and shoved Kyle away with both hands. In an instant, Kyle’s concerned expression fractured into a scowl. He grappled with Will’s burnt hands, trying to hold him still even as Will broke free and pushed him away again.

“Will—”

“No!” Will’s heartbeat pulsed in his ears, mixing with the sound of his own shouting until he couldn’t even make out what he said.

“Will—”

“Get the hell away from me!”

Kyle had drawn too close, determined to fold Will’s hands flat against his chest. With what little strength he had left, Will drew his knee up and drove his bare foot straight into Kyle’s ribs. With a whoosh of breath, Kyle doubled over and backed away. With a gasping curse, Kyle stumbled over to the door and hit the lock. Silence swooped into Will’s ears, chasing his own heartbeat away, until all he could hear was the ragged roar of a distant ocean. A chill settled over his skin, making his pajamas stick to his still-burnt flesh. Kyle made his way back to the bed, his face grim. He lifted a hand, and by instinct, Will flinched.

But all Kyle did was brush Will’s hair back from his forehead.

“God almighty,” said Kyle heavily. “You pack a punch.”

He turned, rooting around in his pockets while Will just sat there, frozen and stunned. Kyle procured a gray pocket square and used it to mop the cold sweat from Will’s face. There was no gentleness in the gesture, just a business-like, matter-of-fact briskness, the same way he used to care for Mom when she was sick. Will closed his eyes and leaned into the touch.

“I knew you were lying to me,” said Kyle quietly. “When you told me those stories in Ten-Forward, there was a part where you started stammering. You’ve never stammered before.”

Will said nothing. There was a shift of the mattress underneath him as Kyle sat on the edge of the bed.

“You remember when you broke your leg?” Kyle asked. “You were eleven or twelve.”

“I remember,” Will murmured.

“Bad winter that year. Couldn’t get you to the hospital in Anchorage.” Kyle chewed the inside of his cheek. “You had to heal naturally. You were pissed as hell. Was it eleven or twelve, Will?”

“Twelve,” Will said.

“Perfect age for a broken leg, right? Just when you want all the independence in the world, and you can’t even walk on your own. That first night you were sick in your bed and you didn’t even call for help.”

Will remembered. The burn of vomit in his esophagus – a bad reaction to the expired pain meds Dad had given him, from Mom’s old stash. The reek of it staining his pillow and clinging, cold and sticky, to his cheek. But he couldn’t force himself to call for Kyle’s help. Couldn’t stand it. So he slept in his own vomit all night. Now, he kept his eyes closed, a wave of coldness settling behind his eyelids, juxtaposed against the sting of heat in his cheeks. He wasn’t embarrassed at the memory. Just numb.

With a sigh, Kyle stood up. Whatever point he’d wanted to make – whatever narrative he wanted to force on Will – he’d abandoned it. He was almost out of reach when Will reached out and grabbed his hand.

Kyle twisted his fingers around Will’s. Maybe it was just instinct. It was quick, and crushing, and tight – a fierce squeeze of the hand – and then, like he’d been burned, Kyle shoved Will’s hand away.

He left without another word.

They met in the observation deck closest to the sickbay. Beverly had given Commander Riker a sedative; he couldn’t say what had set him off, but a quick review of the medical logs showed an altercation of some sort, followed by a reconciliation, but in any case, now Kyle Riker was banned from his son’s room. He’d been holed up in the observation deck ever since, curled on the couch closest to the window, with his features tugged into a meditative scowl.

Maybe he was thinking about the Tholians, Donovan thought. About his own slow recovery, his battle with flashbacks and chronic pain. It was all there in Kyle’s record, but Donovan wondered if he had the introspection to see the similarities between himself and his son. He eased into the room silently, and he stood at the side of Kyle’s couch rather than taking a seat.

“He’s sleeping,” Donovan said.

Kyle’s only response was a slow, close-lipped sigh. He brushed a hand through his hair, eyes shadowed.

“I fucked that one up, didn’t I,” he said finally.

Donovan searched for a polite way to agree. “He’ll recover,” he said, his voice a little clipped. He hated himself for fleeing from Kyle earlier, the same way he would have fled the room when they were stationed together years ago, before Kallonia. He’d thought the years of freedom-fighting gave him some resolve, some steel. He *knew* they had. But in the face of a man like Kyle Riker, all that steel melted into a white-hot pool.

He circled the couch slowly, until he stood directly in front of Kyle, shoulders squared.

“You’ve been asked to leave,” he said.

Kyle raised his head.

“Captain’s orders,” said Donovan firmly. “We’re close enough to beam you back to Station Eighty-Six if that’s your choice. If not, we can requisition a shuttle for you, to deposit at any Federation station in the Alpha Quadrant.”

“I’m being barred from visiting my own son?” Kyle asked.

Donovan refused to see the furrow between Kyle’s eyebrows, the slightly wounded dip in his voice. “You have twelve hours to get your things together,” he said. “That’s awfully generous, in my eyes.”

Kyle rose. He towered over Donovan, not quite as tall or solid as his son, but still imposing. His face was a polite mask.

“You don’t know Will,” he said flatly.

Donovan raised an eyebrow.

“You’re kicking me out because of a *fight*,” Kyle said. He gestured back to the door, to the hallway leading down to sickbay. “That boy *lives* on fighting. He was *bred* for it.”

“I don’t doubt that,” said Donovan softly. Kyle took a step closer, his chest bumping against Donovan’s.

“You know what I got after Station Three-Eleven?” he asked. “I had a data package waiting for me. From Valdez, Alaska, our hometown. You know what was in there?” He leaned a little closer. “Not a single letter from Will. But dozens from his high school, detailing the fights he got into while I was gone. I had no idea he was in the Academy by then – hell, I never thought they’d let him, record like that. What do you make of that, Donovan? I want to hear your theories.”

Something turned inside Donovan’s chest, hot and hard. “I think that when you leave a kid alone in Alaska, to fend for himself, he’s bound to get into fights,” he said.

Kyle’s face tightened, not into a smile, but into something beaming and hard, triumphant. “No,” he said. “You leave a kid alone in Alaska to

fend for himself and he *dies*, Lieutenant Commander. You leave a *Riker* alone and he gets into fights.”

“He was *fifteen*,” Donovan said.

“And he knew what he was doing,” Kyle said. “I made damn sure of that.”

Donovan turned away with a shake of the head. He was a fourth-year cadet again, fighting to hold his tongue while Kyle lambasted the whole archaeological crew – slower than ‘my Will’, weaker, less flexible, less independent. But none of them knew then that ‘my Will’ was a teenage boy who hadn’t even hit puberty yet, left to fight the Alaskan winter and repair a broken replicator, all alone. Behind Donovan, Kyle took a deep breath and started over, his tone more reasonable.

“Will is, if nothing else, *resilient*,” he said. “I was in his life for thirteen years, and I used every single one of them to prepare him for the missions he’d face in Starfleet. He’s been training for everything the galaxy can throw at him since was a child.”

“Including this?” Donovan asked, whipping around. “A year as a sex slave? Did you prepare him for that?”

Kyle’s expression fractured. He turned away.

“Maybe he is a fighter,” said Donovan quietly. “But why do *you* need to see him fighting so badly? Because his mother didn’t? Or because you suspect you didn’t, back when the Tholians got you, and if you see Will fighting, maybe it proves that you fought, too?”

Silence.

“I was leaving anyway,” Kyle said finally, his voice rough. “I’m not doing him any good here, and I know it. He wants time and space, right? Well, that’s what I’m best at giving him.” He gave a harsh shrug. “That kid doesn’t need me. Never has.”

Donovan bit his tongue.

“What he needed was his mother,” said Kyle simply. He surveyed the empty observation lounge, pale now, and weary. “And she *did* fight, Donovan. Much good that it did her.”

He let his breath out in a sigh.

“I don’t have anything to pack,” he said. “I’ll leave right now.”

It was well into night cycle by the time Donovan visited sickbay again. He knew somehow that Will would be awake, and he wasn’t disappointed. The commander stood at the side of his bed, a scarecrow in hospital pajamas, testing the strength of his legs. They met each other’s eyes, each unreadable to the other.

Reluctantly, Will said, “Kyle–?”

“Departed early this morning,” Donovan said.

Will’s whole demeanor shifted, his square shoulders relaxed, his stone mask softening at the edges. Like an actor exiting the stage. Donovan hesitated, part of him wanting to apologize, the other scared to admit to any wrongdoing, to open up a new can of worms. He wanted to squeeze Will’s arm as a goodbye, but he was too far away, couldn’t think of an excuse to cross the room. Already regretting his visit here, he turned to leave.

Will’s voice stopped him dead.

“Thank you, Donovan,” he said. “For everything. I’m glad to see him go.”

Chapter 12

In sickbay, Riker politely but firmly plucked the regenerator from Beverly's hands and said he would see to the acid scars himself.

On the bridge, Riker worked a double shift, smiling and joking with his shipmates.

In Ten-Forward, Riker's jazz band played on without him.

In a Klingon training program, with a savage snarl, Riker straddled a holo-enemy and snapped its neck with his bare hands.

"Did you see the look on her face?" he asked later, exhilarated, wiping the blood from his beard.

Uneasily, Worf said, "It was a male."

But Riker didn't seem to hear him.

And after a shipwide shore leave on Calaris Station, when half the crew came back with alien STIs, Riker helped an embarrassed Donovan weather the crisis with grace, panache, and a whispered, "They're lucky it's not Garvonna Syndrome. I had that last year and it was ghastly. Eats up your entire face and dick, like—" He shrugged with a grin. "Well, like acid."

Later, only when the STI was well and truly under control, the Enterprise's morale division organized a dance. It took place in the holodecks, naturally, with divisions set in place for officers and non-coms. Civilians mingled freely between the two. In Holodeck Six, where Donovan was stationed, they'd made it up like an Ancient Greek courtyard, with stone columns stretching toward the unpolluted night sky, fragrant flowers dangling in the archways, torches casting warm flickering light over every face.

Donovan stood with his back against the wall, a cocktail glass filled with water in his hand. Guinan, this time, had dyed it blue and garnished it with berries, one of which now bobbed, soggy and wrinkled, at the bottom of the glass. He'd heard a few nasty whispers and received a handful of contemptuous looks from the younger officers when he collected this drink, which was why he'd moved away. From here, he had a good view of the arch, appearing and disappearing every time a new guest stepped inside.

"Good vantage point," said a familiar sharp voice at his side.

Donovan kept his face carefully blank as he sucked in a breath. He turned to face Ensign Ro.

"I always look for the best vantage point, too," said Ro, her eyes flinty. She pointed out Lieutenant Worf on the far side of the room. "Worf always takes the best positions. But this isn't a bad second."

"Lieutenant Worf," Donovan reminded her softly.

Ro's lips quirked into a sneer. She pivoted gracefully until her back, like Donovan's, was against the wall, and her pointed chin was tucked against her chest. "Are you going to dance?" she asked.

Donovan's skin crawled. "Are you asking me?"

Ro gave him a hard look: smiling, but not friendly, not amused. "There are a few Bajoran dances we could showcase," she said almost wryly. "I'm sure you know the steps."

What answer could he possibly have for that? He let his eyes drift down to the floor, to the soft candlelight playing over the stones. With his eyes unfocused he could almost hear the drumbeat, the traditional Bajoran flute – feel the body heat and see the flickering of the fire – Luvo's palm against his own, their feet tangling, a bark of laughter as they bumped right into the flames and kicked up sparks.

Donovan took a deep drink of his faux-cocktail, the bubbles stinging an already-sensitive nasal passage, where the urge to vomit was rising. Ro watched him the entire time, a look of distant contempt in her eyes.

"No one's ever going to care for you if you keep those walls up, Killer," she said.

Donovan raised his eyebrows – Ro, of all people, was telling him to open up? – and she was already gone before he realized the tone in her voice had almost been affectionate. For Ro. He frowned into his drink, watching the iridescent blue bubbles burst on the surface.

He shook it off. Here came Riker – a bounce in his step, a grin on his face, eyes alight. He stopped just inside the arch, so close to it that it refused to fade until he stepped away. His gaze skipped over Donovan and landed elsewhere – on Deanna – and then his confident grin softened and he dropped his eyes.

He looked nervous, almost, Donovan thought. He sipped his drink and edged a little closer to the other solitary guest at the dance, Lieutenant Commander Data. They kept up a quiet conversation as Riker roamed the perimeter, making distracted remarks to anyone he passed while shooting shy glances at Counselor Troi.

They were three songs deep before, out of the corner of his eye, Donovan saw Riker take Deanna's hand.

The music changed. Modern tunes, a few decades out of date to accommodate the older officers, faded into something different. Lutes and drums and one lonely piper, and with a shared smile, Riker and Deanna took the floor.

"What song is this?" Donovan muttered over the rim of his glass.

Data's eyes flicked upward as he checked his database. "Sir, this is the Seikilos epitaph, the oldest complete musical notation ever discovered on Earth."

"Greek?" Donovan asked.

"The marble column upon which this epitaph was engraved, known as the Seikilos *stèle*, or sometimes *stela*, was discovered in what is now the European Hegemony, in present-day Turkey."

"I see." It was a slow song, at least to start, with a clear women's chorus singing in harmony, but as Data spoke, the singing ended and a fast-paced drumbeat took hold. Riker and Deanna circled each other, palms together, matching grins lighting up their faces as the pace increased. "What are the lyrics?" Donovan asked. "My Ancient Greek isn't up to snuff."

"The lyrics, sir, are:

*"hóson zêis, phainou
mēdèn hólōs s'ÿ lypoû
pròs olígon ésti tò zên
tò télos ho khrónos apaitéi."*

Data blinked, his expressionless face like rubber. A Federation Standard translation followed.

"While you live, shine
have no grief at all
life exists only for a short while
and Time demands his due."

Riker and Deanna were spinning now, their footwork confident and sure, his hand on her waist.

"An epitaph, you said," Donovan said flatly.

"Yes, sir. The inscription indicates this epitaph was written by a man named Seikilos, in honor of his wife, Euterpe."

Donovan frowned. "Euterpe... isn't that also the name of the Muse of music?"

"Correct, sir," Data said. On the dance floor, the other officers had fallen away, giving Riker and Deanna the space they needed. As the music came to a dramatic halt, Riker lifted Deanna high, her skirts flaring up to hide his face, and there wasn't even a pause for breath before she slid easily down his chest, her legs wrapping around his hips, her fingers lacing together over the back of his neck.

They didn't kiss. Somehow, Donovan expected them to. But instead, almost hesitantly, Deanna shifted her grip to cup the back of Riker's head, her eyes scanning his face as if searching for something. He set her down slowly, a soft click of her heels against the floor.

"Thank you," Deanna murmured, so quiet Donovan almost couldn't hear her. "For the dance."

A spasm of pain and uncertainty crossed Riker's face, as if he'd never been thanked before. Whatever he said in return, Donovan couldn't hear it.

"Data," said Donovan, "who requested that song?"

Data blinked. "Why," he said, "Commander Riker did, of course."

Of course.

The commander and the counselor left the dance floor in a daze, their hands locked, but their grips loose. They were out of the holodeck, through the arch, before the music started up again. A momentary disorientation came over them in the hall, where the magic of Ancient Greece became the mundane U.S.S. Enterprise again, and Will squeezed Deanna's fingers – a wordless 'stop for a moment'. He leaned against the wall with a laugh.

"Dizzy," Deanna murmured, following him. She kissed his knuckles as he waited for his head to stop spinning.

"Too much to drink," he guessed. But he knew that wasn't exactly it. It was the soft curve of Deanna's lips, the way the candlelight flickered off her hair and turned the highlights auburn. He stroked her jaw gently, always and forever amazed by how large and indelicate his hands looked against her face. His breath caught in his throat: her eyes on him, her lips just barely parted...

Heart hammering, he leaned down and kissed her. It was too clumsy, too nervous, to be anything but chaste. And at the same time it was more familiar to him than his own body was, since he returned. He pulled back too soon, forcing Deanna to chase him, and turned his face away so that she kissed his cheek instead.

When her palm smoothed over his chest, over his heart, he knew she could sense the nerves. He let out a shaky laugh and pulled her into a hug instead. Easier.

"I feel like a teenager," he admitted in a murmur.

"I do, too," Deanna said, her voice muffled against his chest. She curled her fingers at his waist, where normally even the lightest touch from her would tickle him. Funny that he'd never been ticklish with anyone else. Funny that he wasn't ticklish with Deanna now.

Will didn't want to stop and examine why. He hesitated, unsure if he could say it. But Deanna read his mind.

"My room?" she asked.

He barely managed a nod. Deanna led him by the hand, one foot in front of the other, until in a sense, it wasn't the Enterprise deck plating he saw. Every step released the soft scent of Betazed's black earth after a spring rain; he could almost feel the wet grass crumpling beneath his shoes, the dew drops clinging to his trousers, white flowers that Deanna called 'misty mornings' brushing his fingertips as he passed by.

Deanna sensed it. When they reached her door, she turned to face him, and her smile was more full. More real. "You're feeling better," she said.

In response – gently, carefully – Will cupped her face and drove her back, until her shoulders tapped the wall and her lips met his. Heat. Touch. Strands of curly hair threaded through his fingers as he pulled her closer and her nails scratched at the back of his neck. And she was so delicate, so small, compared to him.

So harmless.

He groaned into the kiss and caught her bottom lip between his teeth – not really biting, too shy to hurt her, even if some part of him remembered that she liked this. He skimmed his hands down her waist, to grip her hips, and with a deft twist Deanna hooked her fingers in his collar and tugged him toward the bed. Will choked out a hoarse laugh and followed her, scooping her up in his arms just so he could crash them both onto the bed as hard as he could and startle a shriek of laughter out of her. Deanna hit him on the chest, rolled away as he kicked off his shoes – and then she was on him again, pushing him onto his back, running her hands down his arms to his wrists – her lips on his throat, her cheek brushing against his beard.

He buried his face against her shoulder with a hum. A light buzzing in his head moved down to his fingertips, invisible hands sculpting his blood vessels, his nerves, until they were primed for Deanna's touch and he could barely think. He kissed her – and he saw Arbat that first cold night in the slaves' tent – and it was sunshine on his mind, long-dormant shadows of their mental bond falling back, receding. He palmed his way underneath her dress, against her bare skin, and when she touched him – it was the Ferengi slaveowner, the butt of her whip against his throat, a slow caress...

No, it was perfect. It felt right.

Their clothes pushed to the edge of the bed. His tongue between her legs, the taste of her pleasure on his lips. A reflexive kick of Deanna's foot tossing his clothes off the bed; her chest heaving, her head thrown back; a moan of pleasure–

A moan of pleasure. A hard smile. Fingers in his hair.

"Come here," Deanna breathed, and only then did Will realize that he'd gone still. She was coaxing him up to kiss her, and he was smiling by reflex, and the bed was soft, her touch was soft, her lips ... and at the same time, he could feel the titanium plating of a Romulan warbird beneath his knees, taste semen on his lips, thick and alien, too bitter to swallow with your throat closing up.

He kissed her. He kissed her. He liked it. Relaxed. Enjoyed it. Her fingers, her lips, her waist, her pulse, her flat stomach against his, her hip bones hard beneath his palm, her...

"Breathe," Deanna said.

When had this headache started? Too weak to support himself, Will sank back on the bed, away from Deanna's warmth. His eyes were squeezed closed, pulses of white light flickering on his eyelids.

"You're shivering," Deanna said in a murmur.

"I'm cold," he managed through clenched teeth. He reached for her blindly, pulled her to him until she was lying on his chest, a full-body embrace that always used to warm him. He took a long slow breath and Deanna reached inside his mind even as her fingers combed through his hair. She tested his limits, touched the hazy cloud of emotion in his head, searched for the arousal that had been there a second ago. Slowly, she started to kiss him again; and absently, Will kissed her back; but even when she moved down his body, when she kissed the base of his cock and made him flinch – a good flinch–

Even then, there was nothing. Will covered his face with his hands.

"Don't," said Deanna softly, her accent thick.

"Don't what?" he said, and his voice came out even, flat.

"Will..." She kissed the inside of his wrist and eased his hands away, forcing him to meet her gaze. Much good that it would do her. Will's expression was boxed up now, his eyes hooded and cold. "It's perfectly normal," she said.

Will huffed out a laugh.

"It is," she insisted, and she melted against him then, so comfortable, so trusting, that his mask cracked. He wrapped his arms around her by instinct, so she wouldn't slip off him. And there he froze, uncertain what to do next. She must have felt the knot in his heart. "Whether it's dryhaxalyn," she said, and the knot flushed cold, "or simply trauma–"

From a distance, Will heard someone – he thought it was his father – saying: "Or maybe you're just not that interesting."

It was quiet on Deck 8 when Donovan left the holodeck, his head still buzzing from too much socializing. He skimmed one hand over the wall

as he walked to his quarters, ran his tongue over his teeth to taste the residue of blue dye left behind by Guinan's "cocktail."

And as he passed Troi's quarters, he heard a muffled voice and went still. Donovan held his breath, ears pricked. He was still standing there, his face hot, when the doors slid open and Riker stepped out, his trousers undone, his tunic clutched in one hand.

He looked at Donovan – through Donovan – the same way a Cardassian general had once stared through Donovan's Bajoran friends like they were cattle. There was no emotion on Riker's face. Just a pale-eyed calmness that held. He shrugged into his tunic, his old scars only briefly visible, and clapped Donovan on the shoulder as he passed by. The smell of sex clung to his fingers, contradicting what Donovan had just overhead.

It's nothing to be ashamed of, Will, he'd heard Deanna say.

But as he walked away, Donovan thought, Riker didn't look ashamed at all. He seemed fine.

Chapter 13

The last time the Enterprise visited Haruus, it was to offer aid and negotiate peace in the middle of a civil war. That was eleven months ago, when Donovan still encountered the open wound of Riker's absence in every crew member he spoke to. Now, returning to the planet, the Enterprise's only goal was to deliver supplies. Captain Picard would assess the politics through careful personal conferences with the leaders of each faction; away teams, led by Donovan and Riker, would serve both as supply delivery and reconnaissance.

"They don't trust easily," Donovan said.

Riker stared out at the battlefield, his eyes straining against the sun. "I wouldn't, either," he said. His hands rested loosely on his hips, his shoulders relaxed. This easy posture, this pleasant half-smile, wasn't Donovan's style – on planets like Haruus, he preferred to make himself small, play the idiot outsider if necessary, keep out of the locals' line of sight. It had served him well on Haruus eleven months ago, but...

A gaggle of local children raced past Riker, each of them bent at the waist. They were barefoot – better to feel any hard protuberances in the earth – and wore the dingy sackcloth bags of scavengers on their backs. One of them paused, examining the dirt beneath his feet until he found the hidden piece of metal that had poked him.

He didn't seem to notice how close he was to Riker as he dug it up. In fact, when he lost his balance, Riker casually supported him, one hand on the boy's shoulder, and the boy didn't so much as glance Riker's way.

"What is it?" he asked, holding up his prize. Sunlight glinted off the metal in-between pieces of soft earth caked onto the sides. Donovan opened his mouth to answer–

–but Riker beat him to it.

"It's an antique firearm," Riker said, his voice friendly. "But it looks like it's been broken. Here..."

The kids gathered around, watching as Riker took the piece of shrapnel and traced the blast marks with his finger.

"This is where it connected to the barrel," he said. "It must have locked up and exploded on whoever was holding it. See this starburst?"

The kids bowed their heads, vying for a closer look.

"That's where it disconnected and warped from the heat," Riker said. He brushed the clods of earth from its sides and handed it back to the boy who'd found it.

"Which side?" the boy asked.

"Probably top-sider," Riker said. He pointed to a seal stamped into the metal, hardly visible anymore, and missing large segments of its body. "Looks like an Old Republic seal to me," he said. He turned to Donovan, whose nervous system jolted at suddenly being thrust into the limelight, and said, "Right?"

"Right," said Donovan uneasily. He offered the kids a pale smile, but they weren't interested in him. He'd been relegated to Foreign Stiff-Shirt status, he realized with a shock. He'd never played that role before – never had another member of the away team step up and make relations like Riker had. Like Donovan normally had to. To him it was something he had to work at; to Riker, it came naturally. He watched the boy shove his piece of shrapnel into his dirty pack and race off, and then he circled Riker, studying him with new eyes.

"How did you know that?" he asked.

It took a second, but a slow smile spread across Riker's face. "You write *very* thorough reports, Commander," he said, eyes sparkling. He gestured over his shoulder, to the two xeno-toxicologists he'd assigned to his away team. "You must have known I'd read them. Otherwise how would I know to assign Cotner and Moore?"

"I'd go straight to Captain Picard if I thought you *hadn't* read them," Donovan said. It was standard practice to read the previous mission's reports before beaming down. But reading them was one thing – identifying an antique firearm blasted apart by a malfunction? That was another thing entirely, and he knew it wasn't that Riker had an eidetic memory. He side-eyed Riker. "You must have read the reports *very closely*," he said.

"Sure," said Riker easily – like it didn't matter. But there was a hard glint in his eyes. Not competitiveness, Donovan thought. Not a warning, exactly. But a promise.

That glint said, gently but firmly, *I was first officer for a reason*. And underneath:

I will be first officer again.

"I'm going to sleep for a *week*," Moore said as they left the transporter room eight days later.

"I already booked leave," Cotner agreed. Donovan was too weary to speak, but Riker clapped O'Brien on the shoulder, both of them breaking into laughter, and then bounded out to join his team.

"Enjoy it while it lasts," he said to Cotner with a twinkle in his eye. "Just so you know, booking leave doesn't exempt you from my jazz routine."

“You’re playing?” asked Donovan, shocked into breaking his silence. His voice came out mild, no hint of the surprise he felt.

“Sure,” said Riker. He made eye contact with Cotner and Moore, eyebrows raised. “And I’ll see you both there, right?”

“You couldn’t catch me dead at a jazz performance,” said Cotner, his voice almost drowned out by Moore’s laughter.

“Couldn’t catch me dead, *sir!*” Riker hollered as the two xeno-toxicologists veered from the group. They were still laughing – and Riker still grinning – when Donovan slowed to a halt. Camaraderie forged over time. The crew embraced Riker as if he had never been gone. He looked down at his hands, slender fingertips scarred by chemical burns. And then he glanced at Riker’s trousers, stained from hem to waistband by the same noxious gas. All of it was a leftover from the war, nothing they hadn’t expected – but enough to throw the whole away team off-kilter. Moore and Cotner, who had been with Donovan last time around, were still shaky from adrenaline. Their humor was born from nerves more than anything. But Riker, who had never been to Haruus before, had weathered the toxic fumes like a professional. Quick-thinking, in-control – he’d fastened Lyra’s gas mask for her when her fingers got doused in chemical slick. Compassionate, confident – he’d handled the children, the locals, with a deft hand, and Moore had had to crush the kids’ enthusiasm when he told them, “No, you *can’t* beam back up with Commander Riker.”

Donovan, he suspected, would not be first officer for long. He was now a short-timer. He sneaked a glance at Riker, who was still staring down the hall after Moore and Cotner. The away team was long gone, the hallway empty, and Riker’s eyes were distant now.

“You should go to sickbay, Donovan,” he said suddenly, without turning. “Have Dr. Crusher see to those chemical burns.”

Donovan flexed his fingers, the skin peeling. “My report—”

“My report,” said Riker softly.

Donovan studied his face, what little he could see of it. His shoulders tightened. He gave a nod.

“Your report, Commander,” he said.

He eased past Riker, not to the ready room but to sickbay, and he felt very much like an ensign whose kind commanding officer had dismissed him early. It should have felt wrong, coming from someone he’d first seen detoxing on a dirty bed in an abandoned farmhouse, naked and scarred. But as he headed to sickbay, Donovan searched his head for the mental notes he usually kept on every mission, orderly and neat.

They weren’t there. Some part of him, from the moment he and Riker beamed down, had known it wouldn’t be him recording today’s log. He had subconsciously begun the hand-off.

He glanced down the hallway one last time at Riker, his eyebrows furrowed, but Riker was gone.

The nightmares were different that night.

Riker and Donovan were alone on Terras IV, every step kicking up clouds of chalkdust from the mushrooms growing underneath their feet. Riker took point. From behind, Donovan could see the glitter of sweat in his hair, the flex of muscle under his Starfleet tunic as he shifted his arm – up, swipe – the blade of his machete slicing mushrooms down at their root, carving a path. Donovan’s heart jumped into his throat at the flash of silver, the wet suck of fungal flesh against steel.

Bajoran steel, he realized. Treated with mineral water from Bajor Prime for that unique Damascan flare. He watched as Riker’s broad hand tightened on the handle, as that too-familiar blade swung down and cut a mushroom cap in half.

They were filled with acid, he remembered, and now the lump in his throat was pounding, drowning out all noise. He knew how this memory went. He could picture the pores swelling open, the orange globules of acid rising from within.

He opened his mouth to warn Riker, but no sound came out. Riker’s arm swung down again, and this time Donovan could see the orange veins of acid glowing underneath the mushroom’s skin, but he still couldn’t stop it from happening. The flesh burst open. Acid danced over the blade, all the way up to Riker’s exposed hand.

“Ah—” Riker cried. He jerked his arm back without letting go of the sword. A braided ornament dangled from the handle, war bells tinkling as the blade went wild and crashed into another cluster of mushrooms. The thick white skin parted; acid bubbled out; chalkdust rose in the air.

And as Riker screamed – as the acid ate his flesh down to raw muscle and exposed bone – Donovan ran. *He tried to run.* He willed his legs to move, but he was frozen in place. His body had turned to stone, as Riker was writhing before him. Fear consumed him, as he abandoned everything but self-preservation, and finally his legs broke free...

He jerked awake with a reflexive kick, the blankets swallowing his legs. Half of him still thought he was running; the blankets were knee-high mushrooms catching on his trousers, slowing him down. He scrubbed his face with one hand and tossed the blankets back. The stench of fear and anxiety hung in the air.

He needed to dress. Get out of here. Fresh air. Fractured commands filtered through the pulse of adrenaline in Donovan’s brain, his own mind on autopilot as it ordered him to stand, move, calm down. He pulled yesterday’s uniform over skin still drying from sweat, knowing the itch would prickle beneath the fabric; knowing, too, that if he stayed for a shower, he might vomit. Getting out of the darkness of his own quarters, around other people, always helped. He needed a diversion.

The doors hissed open and Donovan emerged, faltering, into the light. He steadied his breathing – imagined that the air was cooler, crisper, here. It hurt his nostrils just to take a breath. With a careful nod to the first crewman he passed, Donovan headed down to Deck 3. Beneath the fog in his skull, there was still a working brain. Deck 3 had no living quarters, just science departments. Office space. No beta shift, nobody in

the halls. And there was a rec room he could use to catch his breath and calm his mind, until—

There was someone in the rec room.

A vertical screen almost obscured Donovan's view. It was transparent, the outdated type that the Enterprise's schoolteachers had lugged with them from previous postings. Right now, it was set to a starmap, glittering and almost opaque, but Donovan could make out the face on the other side. Riker's eyes glittered with constellations until he poked his head around the screen.

"I didn't know I needed an escort to use the rec room," he said. To Donovan, it almost sounded like a shout. He was relieved that he did not flinch.

Donovan blinked. The fog dissipated in a shock. Suddenly he was too aware of his body, of the sweat drying on his skin and the scant blond hair sticking up on his scalp. His rumpled uniform, the bags beneath his eyes – as if reading his mind, Riker looked Donovan up and down. The defensive hunch in his shoulders melted before Donovan fully noticed it was there.

"You look like hell warmed over," Riker said, his voice changing subtly. He pushed the map away and revealed the rec room's chairs, all of them gathered behind Riker, out of sight. As if to stop anyone from entering and sitting down. He gestured for Donovan to join him, though, and as they sat, Donovan took in Riker's uniform – *un* rumpled – and his still mostly-combed hair.

He hadn't even *tried* to sleep yet, Donovan realized. They mimicked each other's posture naturally, hands clasped on knees, each of them bent over to study the starmap. Green dots glowed at seemingly random intervals, not attached to any starbases or planets that Donovan knew of.

"Warbird sightings," said Riker softly. Light from the screen played over his face and softened the shadows there. Donovan studied him, half his mind replaying the nightmare – the acid – the scream.

Fake, he thought – it was just a dream, *a nightmare* – and the knot in his chest loosened a little. The reality wasn't much better: Riker on the hospital bed, his clothes stripped away, Kyle staring at his scars. But it helped to remember. He turned back to the map and scrubbed a hand through his hair.

"Years ago," he said, and he hunched his shoulders at the sound of his own voice, "when I was stationed on Bajor Prime, I met group of men who had been tortured by the Cardassians."

Riker's expression relaxed, his eyes hooded now, his jaw no longer clenched. He stared at the starmap almost dreamily, as if he hadn't heard.

"I wasn't part of the rehabilitation team," Donovan said. "But I saw them in the mess hall sometimes. No scars – not with our technology – but..."

"Once you saw them," said Riker, his voice rusty, "you knew who they were."

Donovan dipped his head, picking at the scab on his knuckle. He'd gotten it on Haruus, and once Beverly confirmed it wasn't infected by the toxic air, he'd opted to let it heal naturally. Now his fingers found and worried at it against his will.

"It's not always true, you know," said Riker, his eyes distant. "You've met survivors of Cardassian torture here. Did you know that on sight?"

Ensign Ro, most likely, just by virtue of her race. And Captain Picard, he knew, had been captured once.

"Not by sight," conceded Donovan. He hesitated, squinting up at the twinkling green lights. Romulan warbirds, Riker said. "I heard the Tal Shiar is similar," Donovan said, forcing himself to say it. "Maybe even worse."

Riker's face was pinched. He glanced sideways at Donovan – a quick glance, Donovan thought at first, but then Riker didn't look away, and Donovan was forced to face him. They studied each other, sitting in the shadow of the starmap, where every flex of facial muscle could be an expression, or could just be a trick of the light.

"I've had experience with the Tal Shiar," said Riker softly. "But it's not them I'm looking for."

Donovan's stomach dropped. Slowly, Riker turned to face the map, his face drawn tight.

"So far as I know, all the men who tortured me are dead," he said, quiet and toneless. "You know, I couldn't sleep tonight, either?"

Donovan held his breath.

"It's too damn cold here," Riker said. "That's why." His features softened, a look of almost longing creeping over his skin. "I'm used to warmth. To Arbat." A slight smile tugged at his lips. "She always ran hot," he said confidentially, leaning toward Donovan like he meant to bump their shoulders together. He caught himself halfway through and stood with a sigh.

He laid his palm against the screen. The starmap warped, black skies turning maroon from contact with Riker's skin. His body heat. He stared at the green dots like he could touch them, gather them into his palm, pry them apart.

"It's Commander Arbat I'm looking for," he said.

Chapter 14

Arms dealers, Picard called them.

It was in the mission briefing, too, and when Donovan pulled back from the away team to check his PADD, it was written there in glowing capital letters: ARMS DEALERS.

There were few words Donovan hated more.

Anyone who dealt in weaponry signified a hard mission for the Enterprise's away team. It was a heavily-populated planet, Taurus, with a mix of humanoid species flooding the city streets. Hygiene was low, for a Federation world, and Donovan had to stop twice to scrape rain-soaked garbage from the sole of his shoe. Most of the trash was biodegradable food wrappers, he noted, that weren't degrading fast enough.

"Head up, Donovan," Riker murmured. At Donovan's side, he stood undaunted, glass-blue eyes squinting through the rain. He'd had his left hand sculpted into a false plaster cast, to convince any enemies that he was wounded. In reality, beneath that cast was a phaser wedged tight in Riker's hand.

"What do you see?" asked Donovan out the side of his mouth.

"Nothing." Riker flicked him an amused glance and tilted his head slightly, leaning his ear against the wall. "But I hear something."

Donovan's eyes widened. Casually, so passersby wouldn't see him, he ducked behind Riker and used the other man for cover. Sure enough, when he pressed his ear against the wall, he could hear the whir of electronics inside.

"A hidden door?" he asked.

Riker bent one knee, letting his shoe scuff the bricks. He checked his chrono, a gesture that angled his left wrist up and pointed the secret phaser right at an oncoming tough who was trying to look inconspicuous.

"Can you break in?" asked Riker in a drawl.

"Is that a good idea?" Donovan countered.

Silence. The street tough took another meandering step their way. His effort to blend into the crowd was admirable, but pointless, and in that pause, Riker's jaw tightened.

"Didn't you hear the voices in there?" he asked.

Voices? Donovan just stared at Riker's back, where the muscles were knotted in tension beneath his cloak.

"Listen again," said Riker, his voice low, "and break the damn lock."

Donovan lowered his ear to the wall. It took him a moment to hear it. But there, beneath the electronic hum, voices murmured in the dark. Female voices, high-pitched, tight.

The street tough picked up his pace. Riker affected a yawn, covering his mouth with his left hand so the stun beam would go high when he pulled the trigger. Donovan punched his scrambler against the wall and heard the lock click open.

And as a door materialized out of nowhere, as the street tough burst into a run, Riker fired a single stun beam. It went right over the heads of innocent passersby and hit the tall thug right in the head.

"I'll take lead," Riker announced, side-stepping around Donovan before the street tough even hit the ground. He ducked through the doorway, phaser raised, and squinted into the darkness. Behind him, Donovan slipped in a foul-smelling puddle and grabbed onto Riker's robes to balance himself. They clutched each other in the darkness, Riker supporting him, until their eyes adjusted.

That was when they saw the slaves.

The oldest was thirty. The youngest was only five. Naked, or barely dressed, they huddled in the center of the room and stared at Donovan and Riker in silence. Stuncuffs circled their wrists, designed like dainty bracelets. Here, dirty-haired and bruised, was a girl who hadn't seen a shower in at least a week. And there, clean and groomed, was a girl with fresh bruises on her thighs. Riker swallowed audibly, his face tight, and scanned the room with a dark expression that made the nearest slaves shrink away.

"Commander," said Donovan softly, tugging on Riker's sleeve.

He meant to offer a retreat. Go back to the Enterprise, he might have said. Fetch Counselor Troi. But before he could get the words out, Riker had taken a step forward, his face and posture transforming into gentle affability.

"Hey," he said quietly to the nearest woman, the universal translator ordering his words into syllables she could understand. "Are you hurt? Do you need medical attention?"

Shocked mute, she shook her head. Riker stood up straighter, addressing the room at large.

"Does anyone need medical attention?" he called. Again, no answer, but a woman nearby clutched her knees to her chest, and a child at the back of the room started to cry. "My name is Commander William Riker with the U.S.S. Enterprise," Riker said, formal but non-aggressive.

“On my ship, we have three thousand able men armed with advanced technology and medical equipment. As of right now, you are all under our protection. Do you understand?”

There was a whisper of movement as the women drew closer to each other, their eyes bright. Riker pointed his cast at the wall.

“Do you mind if I break this down?” he asked mildly.

He didn’t give them time to answer. With a blast from his hidden phaser, the brick wall crumbled away. About half of the women sat up straight, conscious now that there were two potential exits, and only one of them was blocked by Donovan. Those nearest the hole in the wall edged closer, peeking outside at the rain.

“He’s down!” one called, spotting the street tough. Her voice ripped out over the crowd like a clarion call. “He’s down! Look!”

The women closest to her scrambled to look. Whoops of triumph spread over them as they saw the street tough’s prone body abandoned in the rain. Donovan shifted his feet uneasily, scanning the crowd, noting their brands, their broken bones, the sick women tucked against the wall.

“You know who did that?” asked Riker conversationally, his eyes crinkling. He raised his cast, and the laughing women near the hole quietened a little, their gazes falling on his weapon with respect. Slowly, they eased back into the center of the room and huddled there, waiting for Riker to speak. Not frightened, Donovan thought – not exactly. But very careful to show that they were obedient.

“What do you think?” Riker asked the slaves. “Is it alright if I beam down some medical staff now?”

No answer.

“Well, I think I might as well,” said Riker cheerfully. Like Donovan, he darted a glance at the sick and injured while he commed the Enterprise. One brisk request for back-up later, and Riker and Donovan had been shunted to guard the doors and look for more members of the arms-dealing gang. Riker went out to check on the street tough while Beverly’s team saw to the slaves, and Donovan watched him – a lone, tall figure in the rain, nudging an unconscious body with his foot. Hyper-aware of the phaser in Riker’s hand, Donovan waited for the red killing beam to lance out, to disintegrate the slave-trader while he slept.

But all Riker did was wrap his hands around the slave-trader’s ankles and drag him out of the street. He took up the guard at Donovan’s side, his eyes flat with disgust.

“Bad work,” Donovan said.

Riker pursed his lips.

“They let themselves be cowed like animals,” he said, watching the rain. “They didn’t even try to escape.”

Only then did Donovan realize that the disgust in Riker’s eyes was aimed at the slaves.

On their third day planet-side, with the arms dealers neutralized and the slave traders in local custody, Riker and Donovan were remanded to the food line. It was more than just a food line, of course. Riker had spent the last three days working tirelessly with the local government and religious houses to formulate a plan, and it was this line where former slaves could receive their new ident cards, their stipends, and the PADDs necessary for housing applications. Beneath the table, Donovan kept accidentally kicking boxes stuffed with replicators, all of which were to be handed out to whoever asked for them; and behind Riker, stacked against the wall, were emergency medikits, including a full range of pregnancy preventatives and STI cures.

“Do you have any dryhaxalyn?” asked a waxy-skinned girl standing in front of Riker.

His placid expression twitched. He handed her a PADD with the application loaded. “No,” he said. “But if you need any help filling this out, I’m right here. Can I get you a medikit?”

She slammed the PADD against the table and stormed away. Riker inspected the screen for cracks. He used the hem of his shirt to wipe her fingerprints off and then smiled at the next woman in line.

“Hi there,” he said. “Can I get your name? It doesn’t have to be your legal name; whatever you told the clerk is fine.”

“Samma V’as,” the woman said.

Riker sifted through the ident cards while Donovan unboxed another replicator. He set it down on the table with a clank of plastoid.

“There you are, Samma,” said Riker. His fingers brushed hers as he passed the ident card over, and Samma’s eyebrows raised – first surprised by the lack of caution re: disease, then touched by it. “Now, let’s see,” said Riker, examining the PADDs. “You have family in the east sector?” He peered at her over the PADD’s edge. “Did you want to relocate there?”

She hesitated.

“Anywhere you like,” said Riker gently. “And if you’re not sure of the pros and cons, I can take a minute to help you out.”

She nodded. Donovan waved the next woman forward while Riker called up an electronic map.

“The east sector is great for industry,” he was saying, “but it looks like you’re certified as a groomer, yes? The good news is, a groomer can find work anywhere...”

"I get my own?" the next girl said to Donovan, her eyes bright.

"Yes," he said, pushing the replicator toward her. "Do you need a medikit? Or-?"

"Can I sell it?" she asked. "Anything good in it?"

"You don't need to sell it," said Donovan patiently. "Any credits you need, Starfleet will-"

But the girl had already snatched up the replicator and darted away. At Donovan's side, Riker was highlighting the schools in the western sector, district three. He was so absorbed that only Donovan noticed the teenage girl who shuffled up to them. She was abnormally pretty, he thought – baby-faced, with feathery blonde hair that brought out green specks in her eyes. But she was wan and stick-thin, and she had the telltale pockmarks on her neck that indicated a dryhaxalyn user. What interested Donovan was that the marks seemed old – scarred, not fresh. He offered her a PADD and a replicator.

She didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes were on Riker, watching him with a strange expression. As he helped the other woman figure out where to live, Riker crossed his arms on the table and bowed his head over the map. Dark hair fell over sparkling eyes. When he smiled, a flash of white teeth made the blonde girl wince.

"Ma'am?" Donovan prodded, gently touching her fingertips with the corner of a PADD. She whisked her hand out of reach. "Ma'am—" Donovan started.

"It's you," the girl called, her voice hard and clear. Donovan sat back, surprised, but she wasn't talking to him. She was staring at Riker with furious tears in her eyes. "You said you would come back for me."

Riker glanced her way at last, and then away again. "Now, the advantage of North Sector—" he started.

The blonde girl pushed forward, shoving the other woman out of the way. "You remember me," she said, her voice low and wobbling now. Riker's eyes shuttered. Annoyed, he leaned around her to hand the other woman her PADD. "We put on shows together," the blonde girl said. Her hand clenched over her stomach. "Twice, you made me—" Her knuckles turned white. "You made me a mother—"

Cold heat rushed to Donovan's face. He made eye contact with Worf, across the way, and gestured for him to come quick.

"You never told me you were Starfleet," the blonde girl was saying, sounding wounded. Then, eyes flashing, "I was a child!"

"Next," Riker called, his tone bored.

"You made me a mother," the girl repeated. "You said you would come back—"

Exasperated, Riker finally addressed her. "If you're a mother, where are your kids?" he asked. The girl blanched. "I've never seen you before in my life. Now, do you want a PADD or not?"

The girl reached for him. Repulsed, Riker jolted back in his seat, out of her grasp. Worf was almost to them now, and angry tears were rolling down the blonde girl's cheeks. She stopped reaching for Riker. Instead, with her jaw clenched tight, she rolled up her own sleeve and showed him the tattoo on her wrist.

A Ferengi hammer. The symbol of possession. Of love. She reached for Riker's hand again, and this time he let her squeeze his fingers, let her turn his hand palm-up and expose his wrist, where his tattoo used to be.

There wasn't one, now. Just clean, healthy skin, marred only by a pale, slight scar.

"See?" said Riker lightly, and he tipped his hand out of her grasp. By then, Worf had reached them, and he took the blonde girl by the shoulders and ushered her away. Security would see that she received the same items as everyone else – without touching another Starfleet officer, or accusing him of fathering her children. Beside Donovan, Riker adjusted his sleeve and glanced down the line of slaves, his eyes hooded.

"Next," he said.

Chapter 15

The Enterprise had other missions to see to. In time, they left the war-torn planet behind, and the blonde girl with the Ferengi tattoo, too. Riker explained himself, in private, to Picard. To Troi. But not to Donovan. He could guess how they might know each other; he could imagine the drugs in their systems, the handlers who forced them together for paying customers to watch but he didn't need to know.

And Riker did his job perfectly, so Donovan felt no need to ask. He oversaw their next mission to Vandor VI without fault. He led the rescue of the cruiser Koranak with no casualties. He handled an entire week of transporter malfunctions with aplomb, keeping his good cheer and easing everyone else's stress in the process.

When they went to the Onias Sector, near Romulan territory, Riker sat relaxed in his chair on the bridge, a twinkle in his eye. He was joking with Troi when an outside communication came in. There were no ships in the area – or so it appeared – but a Romulan warbird fizzled into existence just as the viewscreen static dissolved.

A Romulan woman stared down at them. Her brown eyes swept the bridge. She wore the military uniform of a commander, and her gaze skipped over Donovan, past Picard, to land squarely on Riker.

Her lips quirked into a smile.

“My name is Commander Arbat,” she said, almost sweetly, but her eyes were flat. “You're in possession of stolen property, Captain Picard.”

Riker rose, his jaw tight. He approached the viewscreen. He met her eyes standing tall, and when she smiled at him, he didn't flinch.

“There you are,” she said. “*T'su*. They've got you wearing a uniform now.”

“You like it?” Riker asked, his smile hard.

Arbat hummed. She reached for something off-screen. “Not really,” she demurred. “You do look good in it. But I like you better in your old clothes.”

Picard stood, his eyes flashing; Troi clutched her temple, a spike of shame and terror curling her into a ball. Donovan, only Donovan, turned to Worf, ready to order him to raise the shields. A sixth sense made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. But by then it was too late. Riker was laughing, low and flirty, murmuring something none of them could hear, like Arbat was already in the room with him—

And with a shimmer of molecular dust, Arbat's ship got a lock on him, and Commander Riker disappeared.

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