

Absent in the Spring

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Absent in the Spring

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Summary

It's been one year since Jack Crusher died. The Stargazer has just been sent to Ulmanon, where a deadly STI is plaguing the planet. Here, Captain Picard is surprised to find a human boy working in the sex trade. A boy with connections to Starfleet and a cartel brand burned into the back of his hand.

A boy from Valdez, Alaska.

There was a child in his office, and Captain Picard wasn't pleased about it – but there wasn't much he could say. Six-year-old Wesley was a totally different creature from the boy Picard had known up until last year. He'd gone into the morgue on Starbase 32 as a rowdy, too-loud toddler, and he'd emerged as the solemn boy who sat in Picard's office now, quietly fiddling with a children's circuit board. The issue was that the rowdy toddler would have obeyed Picard instantly, and with respect. The more studious creature who sat here now? Not so much.

“Your mother will be back soon,” Picard said gruffly.

“Okay,” said Wesley, his head down. Soft brown hair fell over his eyes. He barely resembled Jack, thought Picard with a pang, and maybe that was for the best. Better for Beverly to look at her own twin than be forever haunted by her husband's. He cleared his throat and glanced down at his PADD.

“Where is she?” Wesley asked, sounding uninterested. “If she's just in sickbay, then I can go with her. She always lets me go with her.”

Picard eyed him. “Your mother is not in sickbay,” he said. “She's planet-side.”

“Why?”

“Because there is a disease down there,” said Picard patiently, “and many people are suffering—”

“I mean why does it have to be her?” asked Wesley, meeting Picard's gaze with flat brown eyes. “Don't you have any good doctors of your own?”

Picard took a slow breath through his teeth. “Plenty,” he said shortly, and he stabbed a finger into his PADD screen to check his messages. “But your mother, Wesley, is a very talented woman. She might be the best doctor that Starfleet has.”

Wesley returned to his PADD with a shrug. Did he even remember Picard? From the frosty attitude, you'd think he was a changeling, and the little boy who used to beg Picard to play with him at parties was gone. Disgruntled, Picard glanced down at his screen and jolted when he saw a message flashing there.

He tapped the voice comm.

“Beverly—” he started.

“*Captain Picard*,” Beverly interrupted, “*is Wesley in the room?*”

Wesley kept his head down, like if he held very still, Picard wouldn't send him out. “Wesley, go find Mister Galloway with Security,” said Picard.

“And do what?” asked Wesley mulishly, sliding off his chair.

"Play with him," said Picard. He tried not to imagine the burly Mr. Galloway playing go-fish or chess with a six-year-old. The doors hissed, and as soon as Wesley was gone, Picard switched comms over to the loudspeaker. "He's gone, Beverly. What's the issue?"

"*Captain—*" Never Jean-Luc anymore, since Jack died. "*--I just received a concerning report from the nurse manning the STI station. I went to check it out myself, and I think we've got a situation on our hands.*"

Picard leaned back in his seat, his gut tightening.

"*There's a boy here seeking treatment,*" Beverly said levelly. "*A human, Terran boy.*"

Picard rubbed his comm between his thumb and forefinger. The planet, Ulmanon, had very few humans, and most of them came from the mining colonies and terraforming expeditions. "How old is he?" Picard asked.

"*He says he's eighteen.*" Beverly hesitated. "*And I have no reason to disbelieve him...*"

"Then his condition is unfortunate," said Picard carefully, "but I fail to see how it's any of our concern."

The crackle of static was, for quite a while, his only answer. Then Beverly's voice came back, soft and low.

"*He's a prostitute, Captain. Maybe a sex slave.*"

"Maybe?" Picard asked.

"*He has the brand, but he claims he chose the profession.*" Beverly hesitated. "*Maybe he did. But...*"

"Have you performed a medical scan?" asked Picard.

"*Not without his permission. But I can see what looks like a bruise on his throat. He's wearing a high collar and a scarf ... I can't see it clearly.*"

Picard sighed through his nose. "He'll need a medical scan anyway, for treatment. Get his name from that, if you can. I'm sure whatever he's given you is false."

"*And what do we do with his name, once we have it?*" Beverly asked.

Picard opened the Federation database, his stomach still in knots. "See if we can find an excuse to take him home," he said.

This hold-up was beyond suspicious. At the edge of Tent C, Kato stood with his hands in his pockets. It was too late for the red-headed doctor, but at least if he kept his hands tucked away like this, it would keep any of the nurses from seeing his brand. He kept his eyes forward, like he was studying the line of patients, waiting for a friend ... but in reality, all his senses were tuned to the Starfleet medical tent at his left.

Cut and run, or stay and wait for the cure? That was the thing. All his instincts told him to get out of here, but he needed this STI eliminated *now* or he'd never work again. It wasn't like the little invisible diseases he'd picked up over the last three years; this one was so intense it almost scared him. He could barely look at himself whenever he took a piss. The sores in his mouth made it difficult to eat; the ones on his dick made it agony just to touch himself.

And there's always the chance you'll die, said an unwelcome voice in his head.

Kato shrugged it off. There were dead boys in the slums whose bodies were pristine and there were old men with faces full of pockmarks and pockets lined with cash, alive and well. To the left, a rustling in the medical tent caught Kato's attention, and he tensed his shoulders.

He had to go. But he *couldn't* go.

There. At the back of the line, there was a familiar face, Litauk. Litauk was an expert at faking diseases. He did it every time a Starfleet medical team came through, and he always came away loaded with medicine for the black market. He could paint sores on his flesh that you would swear were weeping real live pus.

Litauk glanced around and accidentally caught Kato's eyes. They froze, communicating silently. Litauk nodded. Litauk would take care of him. He'd charge, and he might just rob Kato blind, but he'd make the money back in a heartbeat as soon as this STI was gone.

Good, said the unwelcome voice. *Now run.*

The medical tent flap opened and Kato took off at a sprint, hammering through the crowd. A cry of surprise – not the red-head, but someone else – chased him as he shouldered past the nonhuman residents of Ulmanon. He had to make himself small, but damn it, no one on this planet was very tall, and by the time he reached the edge of camp, he was scuttling like an animal on his fingers and toes, trying to keep below the crowd. The people around him shifted automatically, shielding him from view.

Use that, stay low—

There! The fence. He couldn't see the hole now, but he'd spotted it on his way in, a tear in the frame where the force field fizzled out. He dove for it now, stomach sliding in the dirt, arms folded to shield his face—

And suddenly someone was looming over him. A green light blinded Kato as she aimed the medscanner at his face. He kicked out, unseeing, heard the bone-cracking contact of his boot with her forearm, the outraged curse she leveled at him—

And he'd just gotten to his feet, just started to run, when Beverly Crusher's fingers hooked inside his collar and yanked him back. Kato

choked, automatically going limp to take her off-guard, but it didn't matter. Two men in yellow shirts, almost as tall as Kato and twice as bulky, loomed at Crusher's sides. They each took one of Kato's arms and held him firm as Crusher read the medscanner's report.

She narrowed her eyes. She studied Kato's face.

"Will Riker?" she asked. "Is that you?"

His heart fell.

The kid stank, Gonzalez thought, but in a weird way: not body odor and unwashed skin. Instead it was a combination of infection from his open sores and fragrant soap, like he'd been bathing in a mix of water and perfume. His clothes were dirty; his hair was soft and clean. They'd ushered him straight from the transport room to a guest room, where Gonzalez stood guard and the boy lounged against the wall.

Standing, not sitting. And his shoulders were relaxed, but he kept his head on a slow swivel. Ostensibly, he was just bored, gaze drifting in an idle manner from one end to the next, but in reality, he was scoping. Scanning. Gonzalez recognized it; any soldier would.

He'd just never seen it in a kid this young before.

Gonzalez's combadge came to life, and across the room, the kid's eyes just kept tracking like he didn't hear. "Gonzalez," Gonzalez said.

"Lieutenant—" And that was the unmistakable voice of Captain Picard. "--we're ready for him."

"Aye, sir." Gonzalez made eye contact with the boy and gestured him forward. "Captain Picard's a very busy man," he said, putting some steel in his tone. "The Stargazer is one of Starfleet's best ships, and there's a thousand other things the captain could be doing, but he decided to talk to you. I expect you to behave yourself and respect his time. Understood?"

Something in the boy's eyes flattened, but his face stayed glacial smooth, and when he nodded, it was with so much half-witted subservience that Gonzalez almost doubted he'd seen the flatness at all. This was, he reminded himself, a child prostitute and a colonist – not an elite soldier. Not even a fresh-faced Starfleet ensign. He had to remember that.

"This way." He gestured for the boy to join him, and together they walked the sleek halls of the Stargazer. Other ships of the fleet, Gonzalez knew, had a more homey decorating scheme: soft lights and carpeted halls. But morale wasn't exactly a strength of Picard's, and the Stargazer shared its captain's utilitarian veneer. Some dogs look like their owners, Gonzalez thought, and some starships look just like their captains.

And the boy next to him, hands in his pockets, didn't look daunted at all.

"You've served on a ship before," Gonzalez guessed.

The boy looked sideways at him.

"Well?" Gonzalez asked.

The boy's eyes crinkled in a smile. "I've served everywhere," he said huskily, and they'd taken another three steps before Gonzalez caught the meaning. His face colored, and the boy stopped himself mid-laugh. Gonzalez caught him chewing the inside of his cheeks to kill his smile. "Sorry," said the boy.

It rankled that the kid had embarrassed him – moreso that the kid was apologizing – and *especially* because the apology seemed sincere. "Forget it," said Gonzalez roughly. The boy kept his head down, a new sadness in his eyes, and they made it to Picard's office in silence.

"Can you tell me something?" the boy asked just as Gonzalez reached for the chime.

Gonzalez paused.

"Am I being extradited?" the boy asked.

His face was lined, his polite expression strained. But he kept his hands in his pockets, his shoulders relaxed, physically signaling that he wasn't a threat. He stared down at Gonzalez, studying his face closely, and even though Gonzalez never answered, he got the feeling that the kid knew.

"Okay," the kid said, and he mustered up a crooked grin. "Well, it's been a good run."

Gonzalez was still processing that when the kid leaned past him and hit the door chime.

"Come," said Picard from within.

He set his PADD down while it was still loading. Preliminary data showed at least a dozen Rikers in Federation jobs, either as consultants or as explorers. Two or three were crewmen, officers. But there was no telling how many were still alive, and which ones were related to this boy. Not yet. As the doors slid open, Picard folded his hands and got his first real look at Will Riker.

...He was rather tall.

Still standing, Riker seemed to assess Picard, his frame starved skinny and his thoughtful gaze just a little too mature. He had blue eyes, cat-like, that jolted out of an otherwise ordinary face, the sort of pleasant robust features that could blend into a crowd. Terraformers all looked alike, Picard thought, and they would need tall, strong young men like this – because beneath Riker's languid posture there was an air of

competence, a sharpness in his eyes, that every terraforming colony would need.

“Wendall Riker?” Picard asked, and the boy raised his eyebrows. Picard checked his PADD to make sure he got the name right. “That is the name of a lead terraformer on Ulmanon II,” said Picard pointedly. “Any relation?”

“No,” said Riker, one corner of his mouth tugging up into a grin. “Not that I’m aware of.”

Picard huffed out a breath, totally noiseless. He called up Kendall’s profile. “Sixty-eight years old,” he read, “formerly of Alpatrix. Is that where you were raised?”

“No,” said Riker again. He shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “When do I get my medicine?”

“When you answer my questions,” said Picard shortly. “If you didn’t run away from Ulmanon II, then how did you end up on Ulmanon Prime?”

Riker studied Picard, long and hard, eyes narrowed. Then he extracted one hand from his pocket, raised and lowered it in a slow shrug. It was the hand Beverly had noticed, branded on the back. Ropy burn scars dashed over the knuckles and seared away the hair that dusted them.

“You don’t recall?” asked Picard, his voice flat.

“I recall,” said Riker lightly. “I don’t see how it’s relevant to my medical care.” He tilted his head. “I thought the Federation medcorps didn’t discriminate.”

“And how are you being discriminated against, Mister Riker?” Picard asked.

Riker turned his hand, flashing the brand. “Social status. Profession. Apparently, species and surname, too.” He dropped his hand. “If you know my name, then you can root through those files and find my parents.”

Picard raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I can,” he said slowly. “Do you wish to be reunited with your parents?”

The only answer was a slow, half-hearted smile. Picard turned back to his PADD and studied the search results. With Riker’s eyes on him, he eliminated the dead and opened up the marriage and offspring files. There was Kyle Riker and Steven Riker, both the right age, but Kyle had no children listed, and Steven’s offspring had only S names, no Wills.

“You seem to be a rare human child who spawned fully-formed from no one at all,” said Picard dryly.

At that the boy actually seemed to relax a little. He gave Picard a half-hearted smile. “Try Elizabeth Riker.”

The name struck Picard as familiar, but it wasn’t there, not within his search parameters. He scanned through the deceased Rikers again ... and there she was. Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Riker, commanding officer of a small space station; she had died more than sixteen years ago.

“Elizabeth and *Kyle* Riker,” Picard said, reading Elizabeth’s marriage record. “But Kyle is not listed as your father.”

The boy opposite him – *really* just a boy – gave a single nod. Biological father unknown, then, but the records really should have been updated to indicate his mother remarried. The boy took Kyle’s surname as his own, for God’s sake – that certainly qualified him as a step-parent. Picard skimmed the files with a sigh.

“It says here you were born in Valdez, Alaska,” he said, sitting back. “How did you end up here?”

“I hitchhiked,” said Riker with an affable smile that seemed too still, too dangerous.

“You didn’t come here with your step-father?” Picard prodded. “It says here he’s a Federation consultant. He travels this way often.”

“He does,” Riker agreed. “I guess we stopped to refuel the starship and he forgot me at the fueling station.”

Picard wasn’t amused. He tapped out a message to Kyle Riker and saved it to his drafts, unwilling to send it just yet – not with that nagging problem of the files unresolved. But even with his eyes on the screen, he could see the flicker of emotion that played out on Riker’s face. Alarm, anxiety, fear. By the time Picard looked up, Riker had boxed it all away. Or tried to.

“Unfortunately,” said Picard dryly, “I cannot allow a Federation citizen to return to the Ulmanon cartel. Mister Riker, you are now under the custody of the U.S.S. Stargazer.”

Riker tucked his hands back into his pockets, unaffected.

“You may proceed to sickbay now,” said Picard as a dismissal, “but you may not return to Ulmanon. If you wish, upon our return to Starbase 32, you may be released to make your own way.”

“Just not to Ulmanon,” said Riker flatly. “A Federation member, safe and friendly to humans...”

“...and home to the sex cartel which branded a child,” said Picard pointedly. “Yes.”

“I’m eighteen,” said Riker, his jaw set.

“And that scar is at least a year old,” said Picard, returning to his PADD. “And on Ulmanon, the age of majority is *twenty*. You have free run of the ship, Mister Riker, and you have already seen your quarters. You may go.”

Silence. Riker stood still on the other side of Picard's desk, unmoving. As the seconds ticked by, Picard kept his eyes on his PADD, refusing to indulge a teenager's temper tantrum. But the clock on his PADD kept ticking over, and Riker still hadn't moved. When Picard finally glanced up, eyebrows raised, Riker raised his eyebrows in return and grinned.

"Question, Mister Riker?" Picard asked, using all his patience not to snap.

"Sir," said Riker in a cheerful impression of an ensign, "I don't know how to get sickbay, sir."

Oh, he was as bad as Wesley. Picard stood slowly, with all his dignity, and rounded the desk. "I will accompany you," he said shortly, and he tried not to notice how Riker's grin expanded at that. The boy stood still, almost goadingly, until Picard was level with them, and then his eyelids lowered to half-mast, lashes covering blue eyes, and he swept his gaze down Picard's body. When he turned, his arm brushed against Picard's, a spark of warmth, a firmness of muscle underneath soft fabric, the same sort of sleepy accidental touch that made Picard think of late mornings spent in bed with someone else.

He hadn't touched anyone in a year, he realized. Not since Jack died. His throat closed up, and Riker, reading his face, stepped away. Eyes wide, they studied each other, one furious and mute, the other blinking, posture keyed up, ready to run.

Picard swallowed it. Whatever 'it' was. Anger, grief. He pushed it down past a tight throat and forced himself to take a step, to reach the door.

He led Riker, in perfect silence, to sickbay.

In sickbay, Wesley was interrogating Will Riker.

Picard could see it from Beverly's office, where the door was open and they had an uninterrupted view. Wesley paced the room, absently fiddling with his mother's medical instruments without even looking at them. His mouth moved a mile a minute.

"Is their tech better than ours?" Wesley demanded.

"Not really," Riker said.

"Do they have droids? Like cleaner droids?"

"...No."

"What about personal skimmers?" asked Wesley solemnly, eyes flashing, like he couldn't bear to hear about a world without personal skimmers.

"Some people have them," Riker said. "Rich people."

"Rich?"

Wesley didn't know the word, so he just launched into more detailed questions about Ulmanon's tech. On the examination table, Riker sat eerily still, his hands clasped in his lap, white-knuckled. There was a gentle smile on his face, a sparkle in his eyes as he answered Wesley's questions or encouraged him to go on, but he was very careful not to touch.

"Is he contagious?" Picard asked in a murmur.

Beverly glanced out at the examination room. "Not by touching," she said dismissively. "But a lot of the locals aren't sure. Misinformation and superstitions are in good supply on Ulmanon." She returned her eyes to Riker's burgeoning file. "My guess? He doesn't believe in superstitions. He knows he's not contagious. He's just playing it safe in case *I* am, as Wesley's mother."

Picard gave her a bemused look. "You're a doctor," he said, offended on her behalf. "The finest doctor in *Starfleet*."

She shrugged. "And he's a teenager. I didn't have much respect for authority figures at that age, either." Her face softened. "And it might not be about respect, anyway. It's more about caution. On Ulmanon, just last week, there was a sick man beaten to death because he touched a stranger."

Picard digested this, his eyes set on the bruise around Riker's neck. Beside him, Beverly finished uploading the results of the medical scan and projected them onto the nearest screen. "Look," she said, her voice soft.

Picard narrowed his eyes. Sexual assault, internal injuries, cigarette burns, poorly healed bones... "Some of these injuries go back years," Picard murmured.

Beverly nodded, her gaze fixed to the screen. Her lips were tight, eyes far away. "He would have been very young," she murmured. "And he has antibodies for diseases from Earth, so he must have lived there at some point."

"His mother died there," Picard said. "Are there any other planets – or space stations – you can track through his bloodstream?"

"A virus from Nathar," Beverly said. "Humans don't cope well with Natharak diseases. He's lucky he survived."

Picard grunted. His eyes drifted to the examination room, where Wesley had hopped up and grabbed the edge of the examination table. He hung there, kicking his legs idly at the table, too short to touch the floor, while Riker answered his questions tolerantly.

"Most boys his age would be sick of Wesley by now," Beverly observed.

It tracked with Picard's thoughts. The Riker boy had a problem with authority, too much cheek for his own good, a tendency toward secrecy

and stubbornness – but he'd displayed a level of calmness and adaptability that caught Picard's attention. Add his near-escape on Ulmanon and his patience with Wesley to the mix, and Picard was begrudgingly impressed.

"We'll see how he adjusts," he murmurs. "If his behavior levels out – not to mention his attitude – I'll see about administering a basic skills test."

"He's probably been out of school for years," Beverly warned him. "We don't even know if he's literate."

Picard gave a tight shrug. "Then we will learn." He stepped forward, cutting the conversation short. In the examination room, Wesley kept demanding detailed answers about Ulmanon, but Riker spotted Picard coming and went on high-alert. "Mister Riker," said Picard, his voice clipped, "Doctor Crusher has some questions for you."

"Wesley, shoo," said Beverly as she swept into the room. She didn't give him time to argue; she just prised his little fingers off the edge of the table and ushered him out the door.

"Aw, Mom—" Wesley complained, but the door hissed shut in his face. Beverly unhooked a hypospray from her belt and spun it around her fingers like a gunslinger.

"Let me do the first one for you," she said firmly, before Riker could protest. "Then you can do the rest of the treatments on your own."

He pursed his lips. Beverly was a hands-on doctor, Picard knew. Her undergraduate research at the Academy had involved the beneficial science of haptics – human touch, skin-on-skin, platonic or not. In the blink of an eye, Picard could almost believe it was summer again, and he was planet-side – those ugly lawn chairs that Beverly liked so much, plastic struts digging into his back – the way that Jack bounced baby Wesley on his knee as Beverly leaned forward and explained her project, wisps of red hair clinging to the sweat on her brow. He remembered the condensation on his glass of lemonade, the dry-cotton feeling of his tongue when he swapped it out for wine, when Beverly suggested she show him the techniques she'd learned—

And he'd said "no," so harshly that she never brought it up again.

Across from Picard, Beverly pulled Will Riker's collar down and exposed the bruising on his neck. It was an uneven purple blotch, deepening to black beneath his ears – not the uniform bruise of a noose or a tightened scarf. Beverly smoothed her palm over the lightest edges, where it was least likely to hurt, and held Riker still. He kept his eyes open, swiveled to the side, as she pressed the hypospray to his neck.

"Right against your pulse point," Beverly told him. "You can find it with your fingers first, before you dispense the medication. Ready?"

Jaw tight, Riker gave a minute nod. The hiss of dispensation disappeared almost before Picard heard it, and Riker clamped a hand over his neck as if he expected to bleed. But there was no pain in his eyes, just curiosity.

"And that'll heal it?" he asked.

"Well, it will take two more doses," Beverly said, "but yes. The hypospray will get the virus out of your system. To heal the sores, we can let your body do it naturally – which will take several days – or I can close them now, with a dermal regenerator." She searched Riker's face to see if he understood. "You'll have to take your clothes off—"

He slid off the examination table. Before Picard could speak, let alone leave, Riker's trousers were on the floor. Bruises and streaks of blood dotted his thighs, leading up to a nauseating mess that Picard's brain refused to process. He turned away, fought the urge to clamp a hand over his mouth, managed to restrain himself by putting his hands on his hips instead.

Behind him, Riker laughed.

"You can look," he said, clearly amused. "I don't mind."

Whether or not *he* minded was entirely beside the point. Picard fought the color down from his cheeks and turned around. He kept his face carefully blank as he studied Riker.

"Can you tell me where this blood came from?" asked Beverly, her voice neutral. She crouched before Riker to get a better look, the two of them forming an obscene tableau that struck Picard as strangely sterile in this setting.

"It's ... from the sores," Riker said.

If he was lying, Picard couldn't tell. He cast a slow glance over the rest of Riker's body. Old scars curled around Riker's calf and peeked out from under his shirt, especially when he held it up for Beverly. Cigar burns, mentioned in the medscan, formed a gruesome pattern on his right thigh – but at least they were fully healed. Beverly, when she held Riker still, accidentally put her hand over them, and only Picard saw the way Riker winced.

"It tickles," Riker murmured, watching the light of the regenerator travel over his flaccid penis. "Can you move it up a little higher—?"

"*Mister Riker*," said Picard sharply. Before he could work up a proper reprimand, Beverly had patted Riker on the thigh and stood, her regenerator deactivated.

"There," she said with a pointed glance at Picard. "You can dress now."

Picard expected more insouciance, more teenage provocation, but instead, Riker fumbled into his clothes and turned away. The tips of his ears were visibly red, and Beverly was giving Picard an exasperated look, as if *he'd* been the one to cross a line. Riker swept a hand through his hair, fingers combing it into place, and when he finally turned around, there was almost no sign of emotion on his face. Just a pleasant smile and a slight tinge of color on his cheeks.

“Is that it?” he asked with false cheer.

Beverly leaned past him with a sigh. She punched a code into the sickbay replicator and handed him a pair of hyposprays. “One per day until you run out,” she said. “Make sure to leave at least eight hours between doses.”

He slipped the hypos into an inner pocket – quickly, like he half-expected someone to steal them. “Okay...?” he said, glancing between Beverly and Picard.

“I’m done with you,” said Beverly flatly. “Captain?”

The boy met Picard’s eyes, his pupils dilating into thick black holes. Startled, Picard didn’t know what to say. There was something expectant in that gaze: anticipatory, questioning. The sight of it made the hair stand up on the back of Picard’s neck.

“You’re dismissed,” he said. “Fill your time however you choose.”

Riker crossed his arms over his stomach. “And...” He glanced at Beverly. “...for payment...?”

“No payment—” Picard started, and then realization punched him in the gut. He fumbled for words. Next to him, Beverly had gone pale, and it almost comforted him to know she hadn’t understood either, until just now. But mostly he felt sick. The flirtatious tone made a little more sense now, the eagerness to strip, the confusion and blushing when he was told off...

“No payment,” said Picard firmly. He poured a world of weight into his voice, to make sure Riker understood. “Not here.”

Relief. Gratitude. Weariness. Emotions flashed across Riker’s face as his shoulders relaxed. He tucked his hands into his pockets, looking like a normal boy for just a second, and he brushed past Picard on his way to the exit.

Only Picard heard his cheeky whisper:

“I can do it for free.”

Alone, Will surveyed his quarters.

Gonzalez had escorted him here. He’d spent the whole walk keyed up with tension, working out his plan for when they reached the bedroom door and slipped inside. Techniques, attitude. What to do if he’d misjudged the security officer, if things got violent. Will was taller, but he was tired too – too little sleep, not enough food. And Gonzalez had the stock-muscle build of a guy who takes the Starfleet regimen more seriously than most.

Picard too.

But when they reached Will’s quarters, Gonzalez just showed him how to program the door to let him in automatically, and then the security officer was gone. Will stood in the hall, no thoughts in his head, just the steady thudding of his heart. His body temperature cooled. His adrenaline faded.

You always were a worrywart, said the unwelcome voice in his head.

Will shoved it away. He took a single step inside and let the door hiss shut behind him. The air was still, the shadows dark. It took a second for the lights to come on overhead, and now he could see that the angular shape in the corner was his bed, and the hulking mass on the starboard wall was just a wardrobe. That was what Will checked first: empty. The bathroom, too. On the far wall, near his kitchenette, there was a sleek machine he recognized at once, with the instincts of a shark.

A replicator. It would go for a fortune on Ulmanon. Beyond frustrating that he couldn’t sell it now. Will studied the casing, the touch screen, and tried to remember how to use it. Dad had brought a replicator home when Will was seven, but he’d never let Will touch it. It was for Dad’s meals only, and if Dad was away, then the replicator got locked up.

“Non-edible goods,” Will commanded, leaning close to the mic. A menu unfolded on the screen, and each item was clickable, revealing photos and input codes. Generic clothing, bath soaps, teddy bears, perfumes ... Idly, he tapped the code for a high-end cologne, but the replicator flashed a message at him:

Visit Gift Shop Replicator on Deck Three.

What the hell made the gift shop replicator different from this one? More capacity for organic matter? Why force somebody to visit a public replicator just to make a cologne?

Fascists, Will thought, half-seriously. He dragged his fingers down the list of non-edible goods, his touch conjuring up a thousand “*Visit Deck Three*” error messages. By then he wasn’t even reading the menu, he just wanted to see if anything would work. Had they put restrictions on his replicator, maybe? Were they only telling him to visit Deck Three because he, personally, wasn’t allowed to replicate whatever he wanted? Will’s fingers dragged over a model ship kit, unassembled.

Visit Deck Three.

He tapped a Bandrillu harmonica.

Visit Deck Three.

He swept his hand over a whole list of personal items, certain that nothing would happen, except he might break the damn machine—

–and the replicator started to whir.

Oh? Will took a closer glance at what he'd selected. Organic material poured out of the replicator, shaping into a slim, discreet bottle of...

There it was, highlighted in yellow. "Lubricant, water-based."

Will grinned like the Cheshire Cat. He pocketed the bottle by instinct, hiding it next to his hyposprays – inner pocket of his coat, where muggers had a hard time getting to it. What else did this replicator have? Will scanned the menu: sex toys, rather vanilla, but no contraceptives. No protective devices either. What did Starfleet do, just sterilize all its officers? Command them not to fuck, and then tease them with a menu full of toys?

Will tried to imagine Captain Picard fucking. That tight, compact body hidden under command red. That stiff self-control wavering. But when he tried to imagine someone with Picard, the mental image fractured. He'd seen the way the captain acted around Dr. Crusher; if he was that formal and stern with *her*, the mother of his child, then he definitely wasn't getting any.

...Wesley was Picard's child, right?

Will shrugged it off. None of the toys on the menu excited him, but there was room to program your own templates. He'd give it some thought. In the meantime, he retreated to the narrow bed that they'd provided him, flat-mattressed and flatter-pillowed. He laid down in his dirty clothes, long legs swinging onto the bed, and popped the bottle of lube open.

Of course, said that voice in his head, weary and disgusted. Will paused, the bottle angled toward his palm – and he could be trying out the computer, testing the replicator, exploring the ship – trying to escape – but he scrambled these thoughts viciously, because they weren't his own. Not really. They came from long years as a child, training in the mountains till he thought his legs might fall off; going without food so Dad could test his endurance; memorizing Starfleet textbooks until he could rattle off the answers to any question, no matter how long it had been since he slept, or how little food he'd eaten. He remembered one time, when he fell during training, broke his leg ... how Dad held the regenerator out of his reach, shards of bone sticking through his flesh, and asked him to recite the explorer's creed. He remembered another time, not even thirteen yet, hiding in the bathroom, doing what boys in puberty always do – and Dad overriding the lock, looking at him in disgust, tossing a study PADD at Will's feet.

Don't you have anything better to do?

Will closed his eyes. His hand moved automatically. He felt the cool liquid kiss of lubricant on his palm. A sense of peace washed over him as he slipped his hand beneath his waistband and felt the heat of his own skin, smooth and healthy for the first time in weeks.

He sent up a silent thanks to Dr. Crusher, to Picard – and with an image of Picard's stern face still lingering in his head, he got to work.

"Wesley," said Picard wearily, "go play with William."

Wesley sat sideways in the guest chair opposite Picard's desk, his feet up on the arm rest. He didn't even glance up from his PADD. Chin on chest, he said, "He's weird."

"Many people in Starfleet are *weird*," said Picard, voice clipped. "A true explorer embraces it. Seeks it out."

Wesley pretended not to hear. His hooded eyes roamed from one end of the screen to the other.

"What are you reading?" asked Picard.

"Blueprints," Wesley mumbled.

Of course. "I hear that William enjoys blueprints," said Picard diplomatically. "Perhaps the two of you–"

Wesley let his feet fall to the ground with a stomp. He slapped the child-sized communicator that Beverly had given him.

"Hi Will," he said in a grumpy, piping voice.

"Hi–?"

"The captain is sick of me."

Picard's face contorted as static burst across the speaker. He suspected Riker was laughing.

"*He wants me to babysit?*" Riker asked.

Wesley looked challengingly at Picard, daring him to say yes. The boy didn't want to go, Picard realized, his heart sinking. Of course he didn't. He'd been hanging around Picard since he got here. He must remember the years before, when Jack was still alive...

But Picard looked into Wesley's small, fierce face and knew he had no choice. He couldn't captain his ship and care for Jack's child at the same time.

"Yes," he said, making sure his voice carried to Wesley's communicator. "If you are able."

"*Sure*," said Riker brightly. "*I'll teach him how to cut cigars–*"

"No."

“--and synthesize the Jewels of Sound--”

“No,” said Picard, voice clipped, at the same time that Wesley said,

“What are the Jewels of Sound?”

Whatever. It was out of Picard’s hands. He gestured for Wesley to go and heard Riker’s cheerful voice saying, *“I’ll show you how to shoot a phaser!”* as the doors hissed closed. Massaging his temples, Picard checked his incoming comm.

Below, on Ulmanon, Beverly and her medical team were hard at work. There had been no check-ins. But elsewhere on the planet, Lieutenant Gonzalez was engaged in an entirely different type of mission. With Wesley and Riker distracting each other, Picard opened a direct line.

“Sir,” came Gonzalez’s voice.

“Status report, Lieutenant, if you please.”

“Well, sir, our intel was correct on the location. But I believe the locals beat us to it. Not the security forces, mind. The civilians.” Gonzalez paused. *“Fathers.”*

Ah.

“If any of the perpetrators are still alive, they’re not around here,” Gonzalez said firmly. *“One is in the hospital with a fresh cartel burn on his face. Dr. Crusher promised she’d see to him personally...”*

And Picard was sure she’d be perfectly professional, but he didn’t envy the man.

“...so we can question him when she’s done, sir. Ah, if he’s able to talk.”

Picard pushed a sigh out through his nose. “For a Federation planet to engage in vigilante justice is ... concerning,” he said.

“Aye, sir.” Gonzalez hesitated. *“But I can’t say I feel bad for them.”*

“A violation of sentient rights remains a violation whether we empathize with the victim or not, Lieutenant,” said Picard sternly. Privately, he didn’t feel much sympathy for the dead, either. He called his PADD to life with a stylus. “Have you found anything at their headquarters?”

“Plenty, sir. I don’t know how much of it is relevant...”

“Then send imagery of all of it, Lieutenant,” said Picard, “and bring those pieces which you deem most relevant aboard the Stargazer.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Picard out.”

He rested his hands flat on his desk and breathed out slowly. When the images came in, they showed a burnt-out shelter, wisps of smoke still curling from its frame. Inside, hardly anything was damaged. A few curled-up pieces of warped plastoid scattered across the floor, but Picard could see intact bedding, fire-damaged bunks, tech in various states of disrepair. A niche stood empty in the wall, where the cartel had kept a bootleg replicator to feed its prostitutes and, perhaps, appease the local population with cheap gifts; one of the avenging fathers must have liberated it in the attack.

On Ulmanon, the fathers of these underage prostitutes had taken their children back and burned the brothel to cinders. Here, on the Stargazer, one of those very same prostitutes was playing with Wesley Crusher ... and the boy’s father had no idea he was even here.

Picard pulled up his drafts. The unsent message to Kyle Riker was still there. He edited it quickly:

Your step-son has been found on Ulmanon Prime and taken aboard the U.S.S. Stargazer, in protective custody of Starfleet. He has received the best medical care and is healthy and whole.

Picard hesitated. It wasn’t altogether wise, he decided, to tell an unknown like Kyle Riker where they were headed – where he could meet them. He would leave that up to Will. In closing, he attached the message code for Will’s PADD and signed his name.

It was in Kyle’s hands now.

Picard’s eyes were burning.

It was past midnight now – hours since Beverly returned from Ulmanon, and even longer since Gonzalez spent the first data cylinders through. When Picard blinked, the slide of eyelids over his raw eyeballs was like a thin layer of gum – tacky, blinding, turning everything in sight into a fuzzy fog. Picard slid the data cylinders into his desk drawer and locked it tight.

There had been only one video of Will Riker in those cylinders, but one was enough. Picard stood, his neck creaking. As he wandered into the passageway, a little lightheaded from lack of food, he clutched the one item Gonzalez had found that could definitively be linked to Riker. It was a travel chip, the kind that passengers used for every form of Federation transport in the civilian world. When he accessed the log, Picard found near-constant interplanetary travel dating back to when Riker was fifteen.

He fingered the chip as he walked down the hall. Images from the video played in his head. It was so different from the others. One of the girls, an Ulmanon, had trembled so hard that her handler called it off. Another, inexperienced and frightened, had gagged so hard on her client’s length that she vomited. Just thinking about it made Picard queasy. But Riker, in his video – just as young as those girls – had been so

confident he made the *client* seem nervous. He'd been laughing as he undressed, joking with his client, putting him at ease – gentle touches, slow exploration of the body, a spark of light in his eyes like he enjoyed it. Like it gave him pleasure.

Maybe it did. Picard slowed his pace. He pictured the ugly knot of branding scars on Riker's hand. Maybe he'd been burned ... and maybe he still liked it ... but Picard didn't want to think about it either way.

He rubbed his eyes and wheeled into the observation lounge. Small and private, it was so close to the aft bridge office that no one ever used it. Not since Jack died. But Picard stepped inside and froze there, one foot through the door.

Because Jack was there. Leaning on the window seat, one knee bent beneath him, head cocked as he stared out at the sky. Starlight turned him into a shadow – into a ghost – and Picard's breath stuttered in his chest. When that head turned, slowly, he expected to see Jack's usual graceless slump against the couch, the clumsy way he always wobbled out of his kneeling position after staring at the stars too long – expected to hear his hoarse voice offering Picard a drink.

But when the shadow turned its head, it was Will.

"Hey," he said, pushing to his feet.

Picard's heart hammered in his ears. He let his breath out in a slow, whistling exhale. "Mister Riker," he said with a clipped nod. He flexed his fingers to force some life into them, and almost dropped the travel chip to the ground. He fumbled for it and shoved it in his pocket, face burning. "I see that young Mister Crusher failed to wear you out," he said.

Will took a few steps from the window, ceding his position to Picard, like Picard had more right to it than he did. "He didn't want to play much," he said with a slight smile. "After a while he said that tag was stupid and hide-and-seek was for babies."

Picard's eyebrow twitched at the idea of children playing tag in the *Stargazer's* halls.

"So we played in the simulator instead," said Will with casual cheer.

Picard took a cautious step toward the observation window. When he slid onto the window seat, into the far corner, Will gave it a beat and joined him. They sat on opposite sides, sizing each other up.

"You used the simulator?" Picard asked.

"Yeah." Will studied Picard's face. "Is that off-limits?"

Picard made a split-second decision that it was okay. "What did you fly?" he asked.

Will pulled his feet up on the window seat. His legs were so long that his shoes nudged Picard's thigh, even with his knees bent. "Well, it was mostly Wesley flying," he said. His grin became a little sharper. "And he's kind of rotten at it."

"He *is* six years old." And privately, Picard doubted an eighteen-year-old civilian was any better.

"Still." Will folded his arms on his knees and stared out the window. "He does that thing that little kids do, where they're not strong enough to hold the stick properly, one-handed, so they hold it with two, and it slows down their reaction time. So we replicated some grip-weights and that kept him busy all afternoon."

Okay, so maybe Will knew a little more than the average eighteen-year-old civilian.

"He is a bit young for grip-weights," Picard said, raising an eyebrow. "Any six-year-old child will struggle with the simulator, William. He will grow strong enough when he reaches adolescence."

Will shot him a smile. "Yeah, but that's not gonna stop him from sneaking in and trying it anyway," he pointed out. "And the longer he goes without grip-weights, the more he's gonna rely on those bad habits and steer the ship wrong."

Picard let it go. It was true enough, but it wasn't usually a problem for boys as young as Wesley. The issue with arm strength and stick control usually reared its head at the Academy, not in kindergarten. But Wesley was different.

And it was interesting, he thought, that Will recognized that, and took the necessary steps to counter it.

Eyes hooded, starlight playing over his hair, Will stared out the window at Ulmanon. If the travel chip was accurate, he had been here for a year, longer than his stays on any other planet. Will's foot, resting casually against Picard's thigh, seemed to burn a hole in his skin, and after a while, he couldn't stand it anymore. He pulled his legs up just like Will had done and laced his fingers over his knees.

"Do you ... miss it?" he asked awkwardly, his toes brushing Will's.

Will's eyes flickered. "The planet?"

"Yes."

Outside, clouds circled the surface of Ulmanon, stark white against the night.

"Not really," Will said. Picard listened closely for hints of bitterness, of fear – but there was nothing. "I kind of like living on a ship," Will said. "I like the sense that you can go anywhere." He met Picard's gaze, his eyes twinkling. "When you're in charge, at least."

"And when you're not in charge?" asked Picard stiffly.

“Then I guess you’re a hostage,” said Will, his voice light. He stretched out until his foot played over Picard’s calf. “But it’s a pretty good cage.”

“Oh?”

“Good views,” said Will, nodding toward the window. “Good food.” He grinned again, slow and sly. “Better people.”

His foot flexed against Picard’s calf, and abruptly, Picard stood. He tugged his uniform jacket down, eyes on Ulmanon, careful not to look at Will. Every time he blinked, he saw that video, seventeen-year-old Will soothing a nervous client with his tongue. And every time he opened his eyes again, just for a second, he saw Jack’s shadow on the window seat, face turned away.

“Better people?” asked Picard, his voice tight.

Will kept his eyes on Ulmanon. “Decent people,” he said softly. “People you can trust with kids.”

Picard thought of Wesley, wandering the *Stargazer’s* halls and bothering the bridge crew; he thought of Gonzalez on Ulmanon, searching for survivors from the fire; and Beverly, making a report at the first sight of a teenager with an STI. Throat closed, Picard couldn’t respond. He could just stare at Will on the window seat, backlit by the stars.

And with his knees curled up, with his chin resting on folded arms, he suddenly looked more like a child than a man.

That night, Picard went to sleep with his arms wrapped around his middle and his legs bent. He dreamt of warmth: vague touches, something hot and firm beneath the sheets. Someone in bed with him, platonic, a heavy arm around his waist, breath slow and even on the back of his neck. The warmth moved south and settled on his thigh – just his thigh – innocent and lingering. Accidental. Casual. A touch he recognized.

He woke up so hard it hurt.

“What is it?” Will asked.

“It’s a skills test,” said Picard, his hands clenched in loose fists at his sides: military attention, shoulders straight and thumbs aligned. Nothing more.

“Skills for what?” asked Will. He used the blunt end of his stylus to stab the PADD right in the center and applied a little pressure, blithely spinning the PADD in circles. Picard reached down and stopped the rotation with a single finger.

“William,” he said calmly, “allow me to ask you a question. You may find it impertinent.”

Surprised, Will leaned back in his chair. “Okay...”

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” Picard asked, deadly serious.

Will laughed. He twirled the stylus over his fingers and pulled the PADD closer, but Picard snatched it away.

“*William*,” he said warningly.

Still amused, Will said, “Do you want me to take the test or not?”

“I do,” said Picard. “But I want you to understand how important this is. Your mother was a Starfleet officer, yes?”

Will’s face shuttered abruptly. He scratched the back-end of the stylus against his desk, idly rubbing at someone else’s crayon marks.

“Your step-father is a Federation consultant,” Picard continued. “Two such people must have raised a son with a great deal of potential, and I believe I see that mirrored in your interactions today.”

“I do have potential,” Will agreed. “I was exercising it quite nicely on Ulmanon.”

Piqued, but trying not to let it show, Picard handed the PADD back. “If you wish to be an escort for the rest of your life, it is your decision,” he said evenly. “If you’d like to explore other avenues...”

“Well, nothing beats sex,” Will said. “Except getting paid for it. But...” He leaned forward and tapped the screen. “So, what is this, the Starfleet entrance exam? ‘Calculate the degree of torque needed for atmospheric entrance if X equals Y’ and all that?”

Picard raised an eyebrow. “It is a Starfleet skills test,” he said carefully. “But not necessarily a Starfleet entrance exam. This test is administered to the sons of admirals, and it is administered to Belassan war orphans alike. It determines your strengths, your aptitude for various career paths, your current degree of knowledge—”

Bored, Will tapped a random answer to the first question without reading it.

“--and your patience with four-hundred-page tests,” said Picard.

“Four hundred?” Will said, trying to sound faux-outraged, but he laughed halfway through.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Picard said. It was damnably hard not to smile. Will was still chuckling at the unexpected sense of humor as he clicked through the questions. Picard had stacked the least-important ones at the beginning; he expected Will to blitz through them, but the more relevant, more challenging questions in the middle – those would capture his attention, get his mind into gear. Across the room, Picard took a

seat and propped a novel open on his knee, pretending to read.

"...Don't you have a ship to run?" Will asked, studying Picard. He tapped random answers without glancing down at his screen.

"Yes," said Picard evenly. "So I would be much obliged, Mister Riker, if you respected my time and took this seriously."

Will snorted humorlessly and returned to the test. He mouthed the words 'much obliged' to himself over and over as he scrolled through the questions, hips squirming in his seat. Picard's gaze drifted downward to the incessant, almost-silent tap of Will's shoes. Scratching at the brand on the back of his hand, Will blithely selected answers in a zigzag pattern across the screen.

Subtly, Picard banished the novel on his own screen and mirrored Will's test. The boy was already in the middle of it, eyes tracking over the carefully-crafted questions designed to catch his interest. But just like before, Will stopped reading each question halfway through and selected an answer at random. He changed his answers just as thoughtlessly, sometimes going back a page or two to select something new. Whether it took him that long to process a better answer, or whether he did it out of pure mischief, Picard couldn't say.

"You're shaping up to be an excellent fashion designer," Picard observed. Will laughed. He couldn't see the admin-only tally of his results so far. It was isolated to Picard's screen, and every three questions or so, it swung wildly from one career path to the next. Cook. Mechanic. Back to fashion designer. Plumber.

With a sigh, Picard banished the results. It was pointless. He watched Will a while longer: the fidgeting and muttering, the boredom in his eyes.

"William," said Picard.

Will glanced up, his stylus between his teeth. "Eh?"

"You're finished," said Picard firmly.

Will looked back down at his PADD, scanning the incomplete questions. Picard expected him to protest, or play dumb, but instead Will just sat back, relaxed and no longer fidgety. "Okay," he said calmly.

Was this ... deliberate provocation? Picard studied Will: the tilt of his shoulders, the slow flex of fingers on the edge of the desk, legs stretched out beneath. He rose slowly, a wave of disappointment welling up inside him.

"Perhaps you'll have another chance to take it someday," he said, trying not to let his voice sound too grave. "I hope that day comes soon."

Will gave a faint nod. Picard took a slow breath, his chest rising and falling in a sigh.

"I contacted your step-father," he said as he turned to go.

Will dropped his stylus.

"I gave him your message code," said Picard. He stopped at the door, turning one last time to study Will: face blank, unaffected. "If you would like to contact him first, I can of course give you his message code, as well."

Slowly, Will's gaze dropped down to the table. Eyes hooded, he tapped his fingers on the desk. Not a yes. Not a no. Picard turned to go.

"In Alaska, we still use planes," said Will suddenly.

Picard hesitated. "Oh?"

"Only Starfleet personnel can use transporters." Will glanced sideways at Picard. "And consultants. It's not supposed to be that way, but it is. The guy who runs it is a real tyrant, he won't bend the rules for anyone. You could be a retired officer and sick to death, but he wouldn't let you use it, even to get to a hospital."

Picard said nothing. He studied Will closely, trying to see if this was a personal anecdote, but the boy's face was so relaxed, his tone so casual, that Picard couldn't tell.

"When people need to get somewhere, they go in planes and helicopters," Will said. "Old-fashioned. Sometimes ground shuttles too. There's plenty of pilots offering that service. But if someone dies, and their body has to go to the morgue, and the transporter guard won't let you..." He shrugged his shoulders. "That's what I wanted to do when I grew up."

Picard's eyebrows shot up a fraction, barely noticeable.

"I wanted to be the guy who flies that plane," Will said, "and talks to the families, and brings the body back home again when it's done."

"Why?" The word ripped out of Picard's throat before he could stop it. At least it came out soft, nonjudgmental. Will stared down at his tapping fingers, at his brand.

"I got to go in one once," he said. "When my mom died. And my dad wasn't home. He's my real dad, you know, not my step-dad. He's just not in my records because I'm emancipated." He stared at Picard, his face unreadable. Then he shrugged. "There was no one in the house that day. When my mom died. So the pilot had no choice."

Starfleet officers die young, Picard supposed. And Federation consultants are never home, but sixteen years ago, this most undesirable duty, the transportation of dead bodies, was fulfilled by some anonymous young man who was there for a two-year-old child when his mother died. And even in Alaska, without the benefit of a transporter device, you could find freedom if you had a plane and knew how to fly. Picard

glanced out the open door, toward the observation deck, where an unsupervised Wesley was snooping through the Stargazer's blueprints on a child-sized PADD. He tried not to think about Jack Crusher's waxy body on a slab in the morgue; of Beverly walking stifling at his side, incapable of looking at him.

"What does Wesley want to be?" he heard himself ask, almost inaudible.

Will chuckled.

"He wants to be a pilot too."

They left Ulmanon only when Beverly was convinced the local medical team could carry on without her. Picard watched the planet disappear from his spot on the bridge. Later, when the cartel heads were found hanging upside down from the old brothel, Picard took the message in his office, and he passed the observation lounge on his way there. He saw Will at the window, standing with his back to the door, staring at the starlines where Ulmanon used to be.

Picard took the message alone. Some of the corpses had no doubt been in the videos he'd seen, but in death, their faces were so distended and blood-stained that Picard couldn't tell. He studied the images emotionlessly, paying special attention to the dark puddles that had dripped down the stone walls behind every corpse. Whatever wounds they had were hidden by their clothes.

With a sigh, Picard called up the prime minister.

"I trust this isolated incident will not impact our Federation status," the minister said to start with.

Picard let out a slow breath, his eyes on the last photo he'd called up: a bloated rapist, upside down, his fingers reaching for the ground. He faced the wall, his broken arm twisted at an angle that let Picard see the back of his hand. An old brand, barely visible, had healed on his knuckles, covered up by sparse coarse hair that grew between the scars.

"I do not make those decisions, Prime Minister," said Picard firmly. "I only want the names of the dead for our files."

He owed that much to Will, at least. The boy could have kicked up a massive fuss about leaving Ulmanon – and it might have gotten him somewhere. Picard wasn't foolish enough to think that Will's acquiescence indicated a willingness to go. The boy had simply chosen not to fight him, and it would be wise to consider that a favor – to respond in turn.

The names came through. To Picard, unfamiliar with the Ulmanon language, they looked indistinct and unpronounceable. He took his PADD with him, studying it as he marched down the hall. The names struck something deep inside him, stirred up a thought. Civilians rarely had access to universal translators, and the transporter log showed no sign of one on Will's person when he was beamed aboard. Had he taught himself the local tongue?

"William," he called as he entered the observation lounge, "sit."

"Bark, roll over, play dead," Will muttered as he turned around. He slumped down on the window seat, his long legs crossed at the ankle. "What's this?" he asked, his eyes falling on Picard's PADD. "More tests?"

Picard was still grappling with the unexpected – and inappropriate – urge to laugh at 'roll over'. He bit the insides of his cheeks. Saw the images of those dead men again. Felt the urge to smile fade away.

"There has been some violence on Ulmanon in recent days," he said. "The prime minister has sent me a list of the dead."

The ever-present spark of humor in Will's eyes seemed to die. He shifted his feet, gaze locked on Picard's PADD. "Anyone I know?" he asked casually.

"I think that's likely," said Picard. He sat down at Will's side, keeping the PADD angled so Will couldn't see the screen. "William, some of these men were found in the ruins of a ... of the tenement house you were staying in."

"Murdered?" asked Will briskly. He gestured for the PADD, and after a moment's careful consideration, Picard handed it over. Will's face was tight as he scanned the names. "Genano nemane," he muttered.

"Pardon?"

Will scrolled through to the end and shook his head. "These are government games. Nobody goes by government games on Ulmanon. Do you have pictures?"

Picard's stomach tightened. "You don't recognize any of them?"

"I might, if I see them," said Will stubbornly. "But from this? No."

Picard sighed. "It's ... an image with a unique capacity to upset," he warned as he loaded the file.

"Luckily I'm so even-keeled," said Will, folding his hands between his knees. Picard had expected him to take the PADD, but instead Will leaned close, his shoulder tight against Picard's so he could see the screen. A photo of the 'tenement house' ruins popped into view, looking oddly cold and damp days after the fire. The next image, with corpses strung up by their ankles, produced no reaction from Will. He traced the dislocated jaw of a man he must have known, his eyes hooded. Then he found the corpse with its face against the wall, its brand exposed.

"Chalim," he murmured.

Picard studied Will from the corner of his eye.

“He was a year older than me,” Will said. “He’d been working there since he was twelve.”

Picard stared at the dead boy. He’d thought the corpse was much older. There was a bald patch on the back of his head, uneven and raw, and Picard had thought it natural at first, but now he realized the hair had been torn out at the roots.

“He was nice to me,” said Will neutrally, sitting back.

“Do you know why he might have been targeted?” Picard asked. He tried to match Will’s tone, professional but soft. Next to him, Will’s chest rose and fell in a slow, calm breath.

“Well, he was working with them,” Will said. “He was a recruiter.” He glanced down at the image again, just briefly, and then flicked his eyes away. “Like I said, he was nice.”

Picard banished the image with a sigh.

“Lots of guys were like that,” said Will as Picard stood. The words poured out of him almost compulsively, hands still tucked between his knees. “They grew up there. They liked it. They thought it was normal. They didn’t have any problem getting other kids into it when they were done.” He shrugged minutely. “Some of them are never done. If you like it, why stop?”

“Indeed,” said Picard, studying Will carefully. He waited, but Will had nothing else to say. Picard approached the door and hesitated there, pretending to check his messages while he organized his thoughts. “William?” he said.

William looked up slowly, his eyes strained.

“Doctor Crusher is, of course, back onboard with us,” Picard said. “But I have it on good word that she appreciates your babysitting services. Of course, there’s no obligation, but…”

Will’s eyebrows shot up. “Yeah,” he said, his voice almost inaudible at first. “Yeah, I don’t mind.” He seemed to shake himself. “I like Wesley, he’s a good kid. I mean, he—”

He fumbled for words and eventually gave up.

“Indeed,” said Picard again. “Well, it’ll keep him from haunting my office, at least.”

He nodded his goodbyes, turned on his heel, and heard a quiet sound – maybe a laugh, but too relieved and shaky – when his back was turned.

“Can you tie my shoes for me?” Wesley asked.

Will had settled himself one table down from the Crushers, eating alone. It was part of their deal: mealtimes were set breaks for Wesley’s latest favorite babysitter, and Wesley was under strict orders not to quiz Will on orbital mechanics or starship models while they ate.

“I can tie your shoes, Wesley,” said Beverly firmly.

“I want Will to,” said Wesley. “You don’t do it right.”

“You don’t know how to tie your shoes?” asked Will with a smile in his eyes.

“I’m only six,” said Wesley with dignity.

“Aren’t you taking calculus?” Will asked.

“Ugh!” Wesley kicked his feet beneath the galley table in frustration, and one untied sneaker went sailing across the floor. He wiggled his stockinged toes. “See?”

Will scooped up the shoe and eased out of his chair. “You know, when I was your age, I could already tie twelve kinds of knots.”

“No, you couldn’t,” said Wesley with a sort of imperial crossness. He sat back in his chair and held out his foot expectantly.

“Sure I could,” said Will. He slipped the shoe onto Wesley’s foot and tightened the laces. “And I could do it blindfolded.”

“*Mom*,” Wesley complained.

“Mom what?” said Beverly patiently.

“He’s *lying*.”

“Will can say what he wants,” Beverly shrugged. “He’s an adult.” She dug her fork into a replicated pastry. “Besides, when *I* was your age, I was already a professional trapeze artist.”

“I don’t even know what that is,” Wesley grouched. “But I bet you weren’t.” He watched sharply as Will tied his shoelaces, trying to memorize the pattern. “What’s on your hand?” he asked suddenly.

“It’s a tattoo,” said Will before Beverly even realized what Wesley was asking about. Her heart skipped a beat as she noticed the brand on the back of Will’s hand, burn scars melting into the flesh. Oh god. Heat rushed to her face, but it was too late to rein in the damnably curious little

genius across from her, picking at his mac and cheese.

"It doesn't *look* like a tattoo," said Wesley doubtfully. "My dad had a tattoo and it was nothing like that."

"What kind of tattoo did your dad have?" asked Will.

"An Orion girl. She danced on his arm whenever he flexed."

Will shot Beverly an amused look, eyebrows raised.

"I dared him to get it," she admitted. Then, defensively, "We were young."

And drunk.

"Hey, no judgment here," Will said, spreading his hands. He got to his feet and started to step away, but Wesley wasn't done.

"So why is your tattoo so weird?" he asked.

Will hesitated. He'd run out of pre-packaged answers. In that silence, Beverly swiftly stepped in.

"Wesley," she said sternly, "every planet is different. Maybe their tattoos look weird to you, but your father's would look strange to them. Did you notice that Will didn't make fun of Dad's tattoo?"

"He can't," said Wesley flatly. "Dad's dead."

And stupidly, for the first time in at least a month, Beverly's throat closed and her eyes burned. She let her vision go blurry and turned her thoughts off entirely; sometimes that helped. She heard the sullen scrape of Wesley's fork against his plate, the new awkward silence at the table to her left, where they must have overheard.

"My mom's dead too," said Will suddenly, cheerfully. "But I can still make fun of her bad taste." He kicked the legs of Wesley's chair. "I bet my mom could beat your dad in a fight, though."

"She could not!" said Wesley hotly.

"Could so. My mom was seven feet tall, you know."

"She was not!"

"And she weighed three hundred pounds of *pure muscle*," said Will. "She could crush your dad flat."

"If she was so tall, then how come you're only...?" Wesley tried to estimate Will's height, his eyes narrowed. "Mom, can I borrow your medscanner?"

"Absolutely not," said Beverly, her tears blessedly evaporating.

"Aw, Mom—"

"I'll have you know I'm six-foot-four, and I'm only so *short* because I'm not done growing," Will said blithely. "Now let me eat in peace."

"Why?" Wesley demanded.

"So I can grow another six inches and kick your ass."

Wesley looked at Beverly, aghast. She gestured calmly to his unfinished vegetables.

"If you want a fighting chance..." she said.

While Wesley decided whether it was worse to get his ass beat or to eat steamed broccoli, Beverly studied Will out of the corner of her eye. He'd returned to his table alone, his food now cold, and he was picking at it with a distant look on his face, not really eating. And it had nothing to do with his dead mother, Beverly suspected. Will had hidden his branded hand under the table, where no one could see.

She sneaked her PADD into her lap. She had to be careful not to let Wesley see it, or he'd never stop begging to use his at the table, too. With one hand, Beverly typed out a message and sent it to Will's account.

I can take the scars away, she said.

They met in sickbay during the night cycle, when there was no one there to gawk. Will was a different person when it was just him and Beverly; the flirty attitude she'd seen with Picard disappeared; the clown he liked to play with Wesley faded out. Instead he just leaned against the examination table, hand out, and only spoke when spoken to.

"Does it hurt?" Beverly asked, circling her thumb over his brand.

He shook his head.

"Sometimes scars like this can cause lingering pain," Beverly explained. "But if not, then that's a good thing." She whipped out her dermal regenerator. "You remember this tool, I presume?"

Will offered a bashful smile. The last time he had seen it, of course, it had been aimed at his cock.

“What it does is break down the wounded tissue and clone the healthy skin cells underneath,” Beverly said. “An accelerated growth process will replace the scar with smooth, healthy skin. But it’ll be hairless for a little while, okay? I can’t make the hair grow back.”

“Noted,” Will said. “I think I’ll manage.”

His fingers twitched in Beverly’s grip, a hint of tension as she aimed the regenerator at his scar.

“It won’t hurt,” she told him, and she pressed the button before he could agree. Red light lanced over the old brand, bathing it in a rose-pink glow of warm flesh.

“See?” said Beverly soothingly.

Will nodded, his lips tight.

“If it hurts, you have to tell me.”

“It doesn’t hurt,” he said. There was a heartbeat, a breath of silence, and then he said, “Chalim gave this to me.”

Beverly kept her eyes on the scar. She’d heard of Chalim from Picard, and she kept her voice carefully neutral. “Oh?”

“It was fun,” Will said. “Not bad. Like you and Jack.”

She couldn’t help but look up, then.

“Drunk,” said Will, searching her face. “Getting tattoos.”

Oh. Beverly glanced back down at Will’s hand. The brand was gone now, his skin smooth and healthy. She stroked a thumb over his knuckles and tucked the regenerator away. A thick stone had settled in her stomach, making her feel sick.

“Just let me do a basic medscan before you go,” she said. “To make sure everything’s okay.”

“Okay.”

He held still while the green light whisked over him. Beverly checked her scanner, tapped it, tried it one more time. Eyebrows furrowed, she reread the results. There was nothing wrong with the dermal regeneration. His scar was truly healed. But elsewhere in his body...

“Will,” said Beverly slowly, “have you been taking those hyposprays I gave you?”

Will’s expression changed subtly, responding to her tone. “Yes,” he said. “Why?”

“Your virus is still active.” Beverly switched to a different medscanner, plucking it straight from the charging bench. She scanned Will one more time, just to confirm that it wasn’t a glitch in her equipment. Her breath came out slow and steady, an instinct that cropped up whenever she could sense a patient’s fear. Only after she modeled the right breathing practices did she notice the way Will’s chest stuttered, his lungs frozen as he waited for the results.

“It’s okay,” Beverly murmured. She put a hand on his upper arm to soothe him. “Will, when we began treatment, the virus must have already started mutating into the more serious strain of this disease. It’s still curable.”

“Okay,” he said, his voice steady and his eyes tight. “What do we need to do?”

“Have you ever been in a bio-bed?” Beverly asked.

Will’s expression was slow to change. Gradually, he forced his eyes to crinkle, and an uneasy smile followed. “First time for everything,” he said.

He really was a child, Beverly thought, and her heart ached for him. She could see the paleness around his eyes and she just wanted to pull him into a hug, like she would for Wesley. Like Jack had done for her. But some people didn’t take affection well, either by personality or by life experience – Picard would be more uncomfortable than soothed if she dared to hug him; even in the aftermath of Jack’s death, when she needed him most, he’d been incapable of bending. And she hadn’t been able to comfort him either. Something told her that Will Riker was different, but still, to treat him with kid gloves. She gestured for him to follow her over to the bio-bed.

“I’m not putting you in it just yet,” she assured him. “I just want to show you how it works.”

He nodded, eyes darting over the bio-bed’s surface. Beverly opened up the diagnostic rings to show him how much space was inside.

“Are you claustrophobic?” she asked.

“I kind of like tight spaces,” said Will distantly. He trailed a cautious hand over the open rings. “How long have these things been around?”

Beverly blinked. She’d met plenty of kids who had never been in a bio-bed, but few who had never seen one before. “Centuries,” she said, and watched Will’s eyes darken.

“They’re more advanced than that regenerator?” he asked.

“In every sense.”

He let his hand fall. "Do I have to take my clothes off?"

Did that bother him? It hadn't been an issue last week. "Yes," Beverly said, "but you'll be given a blanket to cover up and keep warm. It's made of special material so it doesn't interfere with the scans."

"And how long will I be in there?" Will asked.

Beverly hesitated. "As long as it takes." She watched Will's face, but she didn't see a single change in expression. His chest had stopped moving up and down. "No more than a day," she amended.

He let his breath out in a slow sigh and nodded. "What if I have to use the bathroom?"

Beverly pointed her dermal regenerator at the nearest chilled cabinet, using the laser to pinpoint a box inside. "You won't have to. You'll take a capsule of absorbic before you go in. It'll see to your nutritional needs and eliminate any waste."

"No kidding?" Will bit down on his thumbnail, half-smiling now. "I bet you could sell that for millions on Ulmanon. You know, they have three sexes, right, and one is sterile? Well, the sterile sex also only goes to the bathroom maybe once a year. It's sort of a status symbol. Everyone pretends they just don't need to shit."

"Oh yes," said Beverly, pleased to see that he was a little less nervous now. "I had all kinds of 'fun' experiences with the third sex while I was down there. They also think that being sterile makes them immune to venereal diseases."

Will snorted. He shrugged out of his jacket, apparently resigned to his fate in the bio-bed. "I know," he said. "The guy who gave me this..." He gestured down his body. "He was third-sex."

And probably dead now, Beverly thought. She'd met too many third-sex citizens who refused to believe their tests were really positive ... and refused treatment, too, even as the sores consumed their bodies. She bit the inside of her cheek and fetched a blanket as Will disrobed. He used it to cover himself as he shucked off his pants, and only when the pile of clothes was neatly folded did he hand it off to Beverly and tuck himself into the bio-bed. He pulled the blanket up to his stomach, the tips of his ears burning red. The rest of him was pale.

Beverly typed a sequence into the bio-bed one-handed. It started with a hum. At the same time, stomach tight, she read Will's scan results again.

"Will," she said calmly, "I'm going to call Captain Picard."

"Doctor—" said Picard, too loud and too alarmed. Beverly met him halfway through the door and pushed him back into the hall. With one hand on his chest, she shushed him, waiting until the door closed and cut them off from Will.

Picard raised an eyebrow. "Is it that serious?" he asked in a whisper.

He didn't like the flicker of apprehension that crossed Beverly's face.

"Yes and no," she said. Her hand slid down off his chest, leaving a palm-shaped burning sensation behind. She glanced back at the sickbay doors. "Let's go around the long way. My office, where it's private."

Picard followed her without a word. His jaw was locked tight. In her office, through the glass, he could make out the bio-bed, its diagnostic rings lit up with soft lights.

"What's he doing in a bio-bed?" asked Picard, his voice dark.

"His STI isn't healing," said Beverly. She leaned against her desk, arms crossed. "In fact, the virus is mutating, and I was able to identify the reason why."

She pulled up Will's scan results, and although Picard wasn't a medical professional, he paid close attention.

"This virus is only mutating because it came into contact with antibodies from a different planet's STI," Beverly explained. "Specifically, from Ferasa. But you have access to Will's travel chip, yes?"

Picard blinked, tearing his eyes away from the medscreen. "Yes," he said.

"Check it for me," said Beverly grimly. "Tell me if he's been to Ferasa."

Picard didn't have to check it. He studied Beverly's face, her tone tightening his stomach. "I have it memorized," he said finally. "It's a short list, and Ferasa isn't on it."

"I didn't think so," said Beverly. "Because these antibodies have been in his system for eight years."

Picard inhaled sharply, his hands squeezing into fists. He forced his gaze back to the medical scans. Then, in a burst of barely-controlled fury, he banished Will's results and put his personal passcode into the display screen instead. It called up all his files, with all his classified access, and from there, it didn't take him long to load up Kyle Riker's assignment list.

There. Almost nine years ago, Kyle Riker served as a consultant on Ferasa. And eight years ago, released from duty, he would have headed back home to Valdez.

"How is this particular virus transmitted?" asked Picard, his voice glacially calm.

Beverly's lips formed a thin line. "Women can act as carriers. Males of the species spread it. The only way to contract the disease is through the ingestion of seminal fluid." She met Picard's eyes. "This isn't the sort of disease you can contract innocently, Jean-Luc. You can't get it through a blood transfusion or a chaste kiss. You can't get it by sharing food or holding hands." She glanced at Kyle's assignment list, her eyes strained, and turned away. Slowly, when he realized it was pointless to stare at the list any longer, Picard closed his screen. He held his PADD loosely, a hollow feeling creeping through his rib cage.

"Can the mutation be cured?" he asked, voice low.

Beverly's answer was swift and firm. "Yes. Easily."

Picard nodded. His grip on his PADD tightened. "Then you called me down here to deliver the sensitive news in person," he clarified, "not so I could break the news to a child that he is dying?"

His voice must have wavered, because when Beverly finally looked at him, it was with a face full of sympathy and guilt. "Oh," she started, her voice soft, "I didn't mean to—"

"No matter," Picard said roughly. He looked away, cheeks stung with heat. She hadn't looked at him with so much emotion in her eyes since ... and hadn't called him by his first name, either. He crossed his arms over his stomach, the pressure helping – just a little – to unknot the tension rising in every muscle. Outside, in the main room of sickbay, Will lay alone in the bio-bed, his head turned so Picard couldn't see his face.

"Do you remember that research I did back in the Academy?" asked Beverly in a whisper.

Sun burning his scalp; lemonade sweating in a tall glass; baby Wesley sitting on his lap, as warm as a furnace.

"I remember," Picard said.

"Touch can reduce blood pressure," Beverly said. "It can lower your heart rate, induce a sense of calmness. It reduces the production of cortisol, boosts the immune system..." She hesitated, her eyes fixed on Will.

"Beverly..." said Picard reluctantly, not liking where this was going.

Fire in her eyes, Beverly strode right through the office door. "Hi, Will," she said brightly. "I called Captain Picard down for moral support."

Oh, she wasn't giving him a choice, then. He was going to kill her.

"Hey, Captain," said Will, his voice a bit rough, like he'd been falling asleep. He turned to search Picard's face, a twinkle in his eye.

"We're about to get started with the first round of treatment," Beverly said, checking the diagnostic rings. "Captain, if you won't mind holding Will's hand?"

Picard shot her his nastiest glare. In the bio-bed, Will choked out a laugh.

"Doctor Crusher, this is completely unnecessary," said Picard.

"It's medical," said Beverly, her voice like ice, "so it's my call, not yours. I don't have time to argue with you."

She clicked a button viciously, and a panel of the bio-bed opened up near Will's hand. Experimentally, he poked his fingers through. They trembled a little as he held his hand out to Picard, but when Picard met Will's eyes, he just waggled his eyebrows and grinned.

Grumbling, Picard took Will's hand and squeezed.

"How long will this take?" he asked. Will's hand was cold and shaky against his own.

"An hour," said Beverly shortly.

Picard nodded. He wrapped his fingers around Will's hand for a less-awkward grip, turning their wrists until both of them were comfortable. Until holding hands felt a little less alien, and less like a chore. His thumb stroked idly over Will's knuckles, mapping the scars from boyhood fights, the fresh-healed skin where his brand used to be. When the first needle sank its tip into Will's flesh, long fingers tightened their grip on Picard, and without thinking, he squeezed back.

And then he swallowed, daring the blush on his cheeks to fade, to die.

For an hour, until the treatment was done and Will was cured, he refused to let go of Will's hand.

It was night cycle, and in the sparse room the Stargazer provided him, Will was sleeping in the closet.

He'd rolled his mattress here the first night, in a move that made his chest bubble with laughter every time he thought about it. Or something like laughter. It was beyond neurotic, or at least anyone who caught him would think it was neurotic, and appearances meant everything – but Will just liked to sleep in smaller spaces. Always had. Closets, bathtubs, Kyle Riker's old surface-skimmer, where he could see the stars.

Tonight, Will folded his hands over his stomach and curled up his knees. Clothes dangled from hangers above him, the tail-ends of shirts and trousers swaying gently just over his face. In the closet, it was so dark that he almost couldn't tell where the shadows ended and the clothes began. Streaks of blackness layered over darker black.

He closed his eyes. Deep breath. Relaxation washed over the knots in his back. He wasn't used to this, but on the Stargazer, it was becoming

more and more common. He could actually get his muscles to relax at night; sometimes, he woke up and his jaw didn't even ache, and he realized he hadn't been clenching his teeth. Sleepily, Will brushed his knuckles over his chest, bumping against the handle of a knife he kept in his inner pocket, just in case.

That's the ticket, said the voice in his head. *Always be prepared.*

Ugh. Will rubbed his eyes. He settled his hands back over his chest, thumbs hooked together, and this time, without thinking, he grabbed his left with his right and squeezed. The angle was wrong. He bent his elbows until they hurt, trying to simulate the feel of Picard's rough palm against his skin, the perfect fit of their hands—

Really? said the voice, amused. *We both know that's a little too kid-friendly for you, Will.*

It's true. When he first arrived on Ulmanon, it wasn't stuff like this that helped him. It was Chalim showing him around, teaching him where he was allowed to sell, who to avoid. It was smoke in their lungs, Chalim's hand on his hip, the burn of a hot iron against his hand.

He sat up with a sigh. Even alone in the closet, he exaggerated it a little, puffing his cheeks out. If Wesley were here to see it, it would make him laugh. But there was something pathetic about clowning alone in a space meant for spare shoes and replicated tunics, and something even more pathetic about locking himself into a closet to get maudlin about a dead shitheel who would have sold Will for six credits and a hot meal.

Might as well go clown somewhere else.

There was someone in Picard's observation lounge again.

How possessive, to think of it as 'his' lounge. But perhaps he could be forgiven, because no one ever used it except him. He eased into the open doorway, careful not to make a sound, and watched Will work. The boy sat half in shadow, broad hands questing up the length of a tri-dimensional chess board to adjust the pieces.

"Playing yourself?" Picard asked.

Will glanced up. His eyes crinkled. He rarely smiled with his lips, Picard realized; only his eyes, like he'd been taught to keep a stoic face at all times.

"It's not as fun as playing someone else," Will said.

"Well, there are plenty of chess enthusiasts aboard the Stargazer," said Picard. "Perhaps if you set up in the galley, instead of the lounge..."

Will didn't respond right away. The silence lasted just long enough for Picard to feel like he'd missed some important point.

"I'm kind of rusty," said Will finally. "I'd be embarrassed to play anybody good."

"Wesley, then," Picard said.

Will just gave him an amused look. He picked up a pawn and moved it down a board, choosing his new square. "What about you?" he asked casually.

"Me?" Picard said.

There was a soft clink of ceramic on glass as Will set his pawn down. "You want to play a game?"

Thoughts swirled on Picard's tongue, unspoken. He hesitated in the doorway.

"Or cards...?" Will said. "We can play gin rummy..."

Picard had seen Will with his deck of cards. Battered, Terran, it must have traveled with him from planet to planet for the last three years. In the galley, Will showed off the Hindu shuffle, the Sybil cut, the weave and the riffle, gathering a crowd of ensigns who always wanted to give it a try. Picard had found one of these cards once, lost on the passageway floor. A joker with a name and message code scrawled in pencil in the margins, a girl Will must have known back home in Valdez, Alaska, before...

"No," said Picard, shaking his head. "Some other time, Will."

He took a step backward, expecting Will to stop him, but Will just watched him go.

How long until they reached Starbase 32 and Will was released from purgatory? Nobody could give him a straight answer. "This is a Starfleet ship," Beverly said. "We go where Starfleet tells us."

"So civilian passengers get no say?" Will asked. "Isn't that kidnapping?"

Beverly gave him a tolerant look. "Wesley and I are in the same boat, Will. When the Stargazer can drop us off, she will."

"No solidarity between hostages," Will muttered.

Really, he wasn't upset about it. He was just bored. He'd flirted with everyone in the galley, it seemed, and no one had taken the bait. He didn't know if Picard had ordered them not to touch (the thought gave him a thrill) or if they knew about Ulmanon – if the combination of the old brand and the STI outbreak hung over his head like a warning sign. Somehow, the patch of shiny, fresh-healed skin on the back of Will's hand felt more conspicuous than the brand ever had, and he caught himself pulling his sleeves over his hands whenever he walked through the

halls.

Today, he wandered through the Stargazer toward engineering. He liked it there. It was loud, so no one tried to talk to him; and if he curled up in the Jeffries Tubes with a PADD to keep him occupied, nobody cared. Sometimes they handed him a multitool and asked him to handle some small fix, but nothing else.

Will nodded to the engineering team as he walked in. He tucked himself into a Jeffries Tube, legs poking out the end, knees bent, and laid flat on his back. He held his PADD above his face and read his messages, eyes hooded.

Nothing. Nothing but sixteen thousand messages from Wesley, that is. Will could only answer maybe one in twenty. Somebody ought to take that kid's PADD away, he thought. But he read them dutifully, his chest squeezing tight. The other day, in the galley, Wesley had asked him how old he was. When Will said, "Eighteen," the kid got so mad his face turned red. He didn't believe him. Why, exactly, Will couldn't say, but it had started off a pique of temper so bad it could almost be called a tantrum: sullen attitude, feet stomping, nonstop arguing, like Will didn't know his own age.

How old did you think I was? he asked.

And Wesley had said, *At least thirty!*

And then inexplicably, the kid started to cry. A dull ache settled in Will's stomach as he swiped through the messages. He could still see Wesley balling his hands up into fists, covering his eyes. Why thirty? Usually kids underestimated age, didn't they? Will read through the last dozen or so messages, all of them showing off Wesley's latest electronics kit, and closed the conversation with a sigh.

He rested his PADD on his chest. Outside the tube, someone accidentally kicked his foot as they walked by, shouting to be heard over a fizzle of malfunctioning equipment. Will drew his legs in closer and picked up his PADD again.

Heart in his throat, he checked for messages from his father. He didn't expect to see any – and he didn't. But in the darkness, where no one could see him, his eyes burned and his lips drew tight.

"Hey, kid!" said someone outside.

Will brushed a rough sleeve over his face. "Yeah?" he called, his voice cracking.

"You think you can give us a hand?"

He eased himself out of the tube using the rungs overhead. The lead engineer helped him to his feet. "What's the issue?" asked Will, his face cooling right away. Eyes clear, he scanned the warp core for any sign of trouble, and zeroed in on a broken conduit panel on the starboard side.

"We need all hands on deck for this," the engineer explained, handing Will a kit. "You know anything about electronics?"

Will's heart rate picked up. He thought of his childhood projects: the snow-skimmer he'd repaired when he was eleven, the daily maintenance of his first plane, those winter months alone in the house, fixing up the climate control whenever it went down and patching frozen pipes.

"A little," he said.

The engineer shot him a grin and pushed him toward the sparking conduit.

"I trust you to learn fast," he said.

"Total shutdown?" Picard repeated incredulously. He stepped off the bridge to avoid the wide eyes of his crew. Alone in the hall, he tapped his combadge and repeated, "That's unacceptable."

"Accept it or not, Captain, that's the situation," said Mr. Seong. "We're working as fast as we can to get back online."

"Any idea as to the cause of this shutdown?" said Picard, though he had a sneaking suspicion.

"Remind me again, sir, who it was that ordered the dilithium experiment?" said Seong wryly.

Picard pushed out a sigh through his nose. "Very well," he said, voice clipped, already heading for the turbolift. "But if you need extra hands, then I'd rather be down there in engineering than on the bridge. Picard out."

He announced his destination and tapped his foot impatiently as the turbolift hummed. Seong was right to chastise him. When the dilithium stabilization experiment came through from High Command, Picard could have declined it. But he'd liked the idea, and the Stargazer had no other pressing business to attend to. Just his luck that they would pick up an unexpected passenger between then and now ... and that the experiment would knock his conduit panels out.

The turbolift spit Picard out in engineering. He took a step forward into chaos. With the conduits on the fritz, engineering's heat was off the charts, and all around him, yellow tunics covered the floor. Working shirtless, and absolutely glistening with sweat, the engineers wormed their way into Jeffries Tubes and shouted to be heard over the hum of the warp core and spark of malfunctioning equipment.

Then–

"We use gloves for a reason, Bumie," said a familiar voice – firm, but sparkling with amusement. Picard turned his head and felt his lungs freeze. At the far end of the warp core, Will Riker was helping a young engineer apply a healing ointment to burnt palms. Like the rest of the

engineers, Will wore no shirt, his lean frame on full display, with sweat glistening in his dark curls of chest hair. A tool belt was slung low on his hips as he helped Bumie out.

“Good?” Will asked, wedging protective gloves onto Bumie’s hands.

“Good,” said the lieutenant sheepishly.

“Go help Jarris with the coolant system,” Will advised. “It won’t hurt as much.”

And it didn’t require much dexterity, Picard noticed – a skill Bumie was severely lacking. He watched Will with narrowed eyes as the boy went back to work, skillfully dismantling a conduit panel that had half-melted shut. Where had he learned to do that? As Will knocked out a conduit panel in quick, practiced motions, Picard timed him against the other engineers. Some of them were faster ... but *all* of them should have been. He circled the warp core, listening closely as Will worked.

The man next to him, a petty officer named Gilbard, was cursing under his breath. Dropping his wrench, Gilbard’s low swearing became a growl. He kicked the wall, retrieved his wrench, and gave a vicious, “Fuck!” as the conduit panel shocked him.

When Will’s elbow brushed him, Gilbard turned on the younger man with a flash of fury in his eyes.

“Would you watch where you’re going?” he snapped. “If you can’t stay in your space, go sit down. I’m not here to babysit you–”

“Hey, Gil, can you help me with this?” Will interrupted cheerfully, like he hadn’t heard. “I can’t get the spanner to turn.”

Gilbard blinked at the conduit panel. Silenced by the request, he leaned in and notched the spanner with a quick turn of the wrist.

“How’d you do that?” asked Will, though Picard had seen him do the exact same thing just seconds ago.

“You have to hold it at a forty-five degree angle,” Gilbard said shortly. “Can you handle the rest on your own, or do you need me to do that too?”

“I’ll ask if I need help,” said Will, keeping his voice light. Gilbard didn’t seem to notice how thoroughly his tirade had been diffused, and when he went back to work, it was with significantly less swearing and kicking at the wall.

“William,” said Picard, his voice sharp.

Will glanced up at him, startled. A few of the engineers exchanged silent looks as Will packed up his conduit and picked his way through the warp core to Picard’s side. They looked each other up and down, a hint of worry entering Will’s eyes the longer Picard stayed silent.

He was waiting for a reprimand, Picard realized. Instead, Picard said,

“Have you ever manned a spaceflight?”

Will blinked. His hands relaxed a little, resting on his tool belt. “Sorry?”

“I noticed in your file that you attended the flight academy in Valdez,” Picard. “You flew your first solo flight at age eleven. Is that correct?”

A few of the engineers looked up, their eyebrows raised. Will avoided their gazes.

“Yes,” he said sheepishly.

He clearly didn’t want to answer the question about spaceflights – probably because, if he had manned any shuttles, he’d done so without a permit, and under the age of eighteen. Picard let it slide.

“I’d like to open up the simulator for your use,” Picard said. “I know you’ve completed a few programs with Wesley, but there are advanced training programs locked for Starfleet personnel only. You may get some use out of them.”

He turned to find Seong.

“Mister Seong,” he said, “might I steal your apprentice engineer?”

Seong didn’t even glance up. He was wrist-deep in a conduit panel. “I thought you were here to help,” he complained.

Picard searched for an excuse and couldn’t find one. When he turned back to Will, he found the boy watching him mischievously ... with a spare toolbelt in his hand.

“Oh, alright,” Picard muttered.

“Not much of a grease monkey, Captain?” asked Will innocently. Picard’s eyes fell on Will’s chest, the lean muscle, the dark hair, the sweat-sleek skin. He looked away.

And held his hands out for the tool belt.

One hour later, with the warp core singing and everything in its proper place, Picard and Will made their way to the shuttle bay. Will hadn’t bothered to put his shirt back on. He walked in great, loping strides, his posture looser than Picard had seen before, his eyes smiling even though his lips weren’t. It would be good to give him more work, Picard decided.

But first...

"Are you familiar with Starfleet shuttles?" Picard asked as the hatch swung open.

"I've never been in one before," Will said, ducking in. "But I've seen blueprints." He moved through the shuttle with his head on a swivel and his shoulders hunched to avoid hitting the ceiling. Without asking, he dropped into the pilot's chair. "Want to give me a run-down?" he asked Picard.

Picard eased into the other chair. He watched as Will ran his fingers over the dashboard controls, eyes bright and searching.

"Figure it out," said Picard lightly.

Will froze. He sneaked a glance at Picard, eyebrows furrowed.

"Something wrong?" asked Picard.

A slow smile spread across Will's face. With lips, this time. "No," he said, and he turned back to the dashboard with relish. "But if I crash, you're paying the bill."

"If you crash, we'll both be dead," Picard said. "So don't crash."

"Aye, sir!" said Will, punching the start-up button. He adjusted the seat with a manic burst of energy and slapped the lights and cartography system into gear. Narrow eyes examined the display screens as they flared to life. Then, one hand on the steering shaft, biceps flexing, Will eased the shuttle into space.

"Where to?" he asked, his voice distant with concentration.

Picard didn't speak immediately. He watched the tracks closely as Will pushed the shuttle forward, waiting for any of the usual clumsy bumps that accompanied takeoff. But the shuttle took off smooth and silent, like Will had done this a thousand times before.

"There's a nearby moon," Picard said. "Andromedia. That's 'media', not 'meda.' If you put it into the navigation system, it will generate a route for you."

"Atmo dip?" Will asked, absently typing in the planet's name.

"If you're up to it," said Picard.

Will flashed him a tight grin. "I'm up for it," he said. He sat back in his seat, practically lounging, and as he guided the shuttle in a smooth glide toward Andromedia, Picard sneaked a look at his tense muscles, the tan, taut stomach that disappeared in a flat line down toward his waistband, the happy trail of curls that peeked out from the fabric and climbed up Will's stomach and chest. As Will worked the steering shaft, his arms shifted, revealing more of his pecs and the dusky nipples hidden underneath his chest hair.

As they rounded Andromedia, Will caught Picard's eyes. His face softened. His gaze lingered. And then, strictly professional, he looked away.

Picard couldn't say the same for himself.

He found Will in the rec room, fiddling with the replicator. Picard had started the boy on a three-sevenths shift in engineering – three shifts on, seven shifts off, for every ten shifts the Stargazer cycled through. Fresh off his latest, Will still had a streak of coolant on his collar, his hair wet and wiry from the shower. The scent of muted sweat and engine grease clung to him as he tapped the replicator with the flat of his hand.

"I'd like you to take the skills test again," said Picard with no preamble.

Will's eyes rotated sideways. He looked Picard up and down and slapped the replicator again. "This thing is broken," he said.

"William."

"Will." Will flipped the control panel open and peered inside. "Is it gonna hurt me if I stick my fingers in there?"

Picard glanced inside to see a clog of replimatter congealing in the gears. "It won't hurt you," he said. "But Will, I need you to pay attention. Listen to me."

Will scooped a handful of half-hardened replimatter out of the tank. "I'm listening."

"The skills test, if taken seriously, will open new doors for you, wherever you go," said Picard. "Now, I've seen your talents in the engineering section. You have a good mind for mechanics. Excellent management skills. A knack for spaceflight." He took a deep breath and begged the stars for patience as Will flicked a glob of replimatter onto the floor. "With skills like that, you could become a civilian pilot," Picard said. "An engineer. I suspect you have the necessary qualities to become a leader in whatever field you choose—"

Will's fingers were still coated in replimatter. He slipped them between his lips, eyes glittering, and sucked the slick, creamy fluid away. His gaze locked onto Picard's as he licked his fingers clean.

"That's poisonous, you know," Picard dead-panned.

Will laughed. It was a miracle he didn't choke on his own fingers. "I *am* the leader in my field," he said dismissively, turning back to the replimatter. "Trust me, before you took me off Ulmanon, I was making bank."

“As a sex slave,” said Picard flatly, “*branded like cattle* so your masters didn’t lose you.”

The words shocked Picard himself even as he said them. His face heated, his heart hammering in his ears. But Will said nothing, his face serene as he dug around in the replimatter and clicked the tank shut. He lit up the access display and studied the codes.

“Can you help me put a template in?” he asked.

Picard took a shaky breath. He leaned forward, close enough to feel the warmth of Will’s body. Will had already programmed a new code into the template box, but he’d made a mistake halfway through.

“Here,” Picard said, tracing the line with his finger. “You forgot the backslash.”

Will’s face lit up. He edited the line and hit the button for automatic dispersal.

“What are you making?” asked Picard.

The replicator hummed. Will leaned against the wall, the picture of innocence, as his template took form. At first Picard didn’t know what he was staring at. It was long, thick, cylindrical, covered in ridges and textured whorls. He picked it up and nearly dropped it, shocked by the warmth of it, the silky feeling of real flesh, the synthetic pulse beating beneath the surface.

“What—?” he started, and then he noticed a suspicious-looking slit at the end of the cylinder, just as it leaked a salty drop of pre-cum onto the floor.

“Thanks,” Will said, taking it out of Picard’s hands. “It’s Ganymedian. All the rage planet-side.” He bent the dildo to show how it twisted itself back into shape, fully mobile. “Way more range than a human penis,” Will said helpfully. “You mind checking out my other templates? I had the same issue, and I’m not sure it’s the backslash this time—”

“*Enough*,” Picard snapped, and Will stopped talking with a laugh. He still looked amused, even when Picard opened up the crew list and removed Will’s name from the access panel.

“I’m not allowed to use the replicator anymore?” asked Will. “Hey, isn’t that a violation of my human rights?”

He said it with hooded eyes, his voice practically a purr. Picard glanced down at the ultra-realistic alien cock in Will’s hands and shook his head.

“You may use it for food,” he said shortly, “and you may use the ready-made templates *only*. Your programming rights have been revoked.”

“I didn’t realize the replicator had to be kid-friendly,” said Will. “Seems to me like there were plenty of sex toys already in the template folder. What makes mine off-limits?”

“You—” Picard choked on his own justifications. He stared blankly at the access panel, his mind awl. What *did* make Will different? Picard was so used to acting only with full justification that now, when questioned, he was shocked to find he couldn’t explain himself. The boy was eighteen. He was an emancipated minor even before he came of age, and there were no rules to prevent curious minors from exploring the replicator’s functions, anyway; Picard had done it himself as a teen. He stared down at the dildo again, color rising to his cheeks. Then he glanced sideways, at the amused crewmembers pretending not to watch, and a sense of relief unfolded in him. He had his excuse. Now he just had to live with the shame of slapping down a punishment without thinking it through.

“Do what you want in *private*,” he said finally, closing the replicator’s menu. “But you will not break the bounds of public decency on my ship. Your access to this replicator has been permanently revoked, do you understand?”

“Are you going to give me back my programming privileges?” asked Will bluntly.

“Yes,” Picard said. “Now, *do you understand?*”

Will’s eyes were dancing. He saluted with the dildo, letting its swollen head bob against his temple.

“Aye, sir,” he said.

“He’s testing boundaries,” Beverly said. “That’s all it is.”

“In Starfleet, we call that insubordination,” Picard said, his arms crossed tight over his chest.

“Well, Will isn’t *in* Starfleet,” said Beverly pointedly. “He’s a teenage boy who’s been through enormous amounts of trauma, both mental and physical.” She shuffled her medical PADDs, eyes strained as she squinted at the contents. “This department really is a pigsty since I left, you know.”

Picard’s heart lurched in his chest. “Well, you can always come back,” he said gruffly, avoiding Beverly’s eyes.

Silence. Just the clack of PADDs against each other, and a new twist of pain in Picard’s throat. He stared down at his feet, his leg bouncing.

“You know what I think?” said Beverly finally. “About the dildo incident. Not about your hopeless medical team.”

“You trained half this medical team,” Picard protested.

“The *good* half,” said Beverly, but then she caught his eyes and her smile faded. “Jean-Luc. He’s not just testing boundaries. He’s testing *you*. He’s acting out because he needs to know what you’ll do when you’re pissed off at him. How much you’ll change.”

Picard blinked. “How much I’ll *change*?” he said, shifting uncomfortably.

“Well, think about it,” Beverly said. “He lost his mother when he was, what, two? His father abused him – we know that from the medical scans – and then abandoned him when he was at most fifteen. He’s spent the last three years chaining himself to pimps and slavers, and the closest thing he has to a friend is that boy Chalim who roped him into being *branded* and working for the cartel.” She glanced up from her stack of PADDs. “If you were him, would you trust anyone who showed you kindness?”

Picard grunted, his stomach heavy. “I rather suspect I’d be waiting for the facade to break,” he said. “For the hammer to fall.”

“Exactly.” Beverly sat back with a sigh. She rubbed at the corner of her eye. “The only person he trusts not to hurt him on this ship is Wesley. But he *wants* to trust *you*. That’s why he needles you – he needs you to prove that you can take it. That you don’t think he’s bad, and you won’t betray him. Mistreat him.”

Mistreat him. The words rippled uncomfortably over Picard’s scalp and settled into his shoulders, turning the muscles there into knots. He was almost scared to meet Beverly’s eyes. A question formed on his lips, but he couldn’t force himself to say it – to seek the clarification he needed.

But Beverly could always read him better than anyone. Her face softened.

“Jean-Luc,” she said, “he’s an adult.”

Picard broke eye contact at once. “I know that,” he said stiffly.

“I mean to say that if he wants sex – if *you* want sex – that’s fine. It’s not *mistreatment*. It’s–”

“*Beverly*,” said Picard, jolting to his feet. He fumbled for words, his throat tight. “I didn’t mean–”

“No, listen.” Beverly slammed her palm against the table, but her face was calm. “If that’s what he needs, then that’s what he needs. It doesn’t automatically equal mistreatment. The last thing he wants is for you to act like he’s been permanently tainted–”

“I don’t think–”

“--whether that taint comes from the stigma of being a prostitute,” Beverly continued, raising her voice, “or whether it comes from trauma, he does not want you to think of him that way. Do you understand?”

Picard’s voice came out choked and waspish, his eyes cold. “I assure you,” he said lowly, “I do *not* think of him that way. At all. I don’t think of *anyone* that way. I am the captain of this ship, and the captain does not...” His eyes stung. Shocked, he cut himself off and turned away. Silence ate at him, and he curled his fingers over his lips until his breathing evened out. “He just doesn’t,” he whispered.

Beverly took a breath, as if to say more, but when she studied Picard’s face, she dropped it. The breath came out as a sigh instead. Her gaze fell back to the medical PADDs, offering Picard no more access to her expression, to her eyes. All he could see was the part in her hair, the gentle fall of autumn colors tangled up from too many hours at work.

“You know,” said Beverly quietly, “there was a time, after Jack died, when I thought...”

But she cut herself off, and even if she didn’t, Picard’s heart was thundering too loud for him to hear her.

Will curled up on the window seat, his legs tucked beneath him. His PADD was balanced on his knee, but he wasn’t staring at it. Like always, he was staring at the starlines instead. How come nobody ever came here, except him? It was right next to the crew quarters. You’d think it would be swarmed with people trying to catch the view. Board games and decks of cards lay abandoned in a game table across the room, untouched. He’d checked them out. The pieces were dusty; the cards were unbent. It was clear that, although there were two observation lounges on the Stargazer, the crew considered one of them off-limits.

It had to be because Picard’s office was so closeby.

Was he so unlikable? Will didn’t think so. He’d heard the way Seong bantered with Picard over the comm. And he saw the way Beverly and Wesley acted with him: not affectionate, sometimes even aggressive, but comfortable with him in a way that indicated they’d known each other for years, that they knew they could get away with anything and Picard would still be there. Some of the things Wesley said to Picard ... hearing them, Will always put on a laugh, pretended to be amused. But it made his knees shake. He’d been sick to his stomach twice, just hearing this precocious six-year-old insult the captain to his face.

But nothing ever came of it, either. And earlier today, when Picard banned Will from the replicator, he’d been so embarrassed not to have a good reason that he stammered and reversed his decision in seconds. That wasn’t the sign of a tyrant; Will knew. Because–

Because if it were me, said that unwelcome voice in his head, *you would have wished you were dead.*

Will rolled his shoulders, a sudden stiff knot developing there, just between the blades. He lit his PADD up and let his fingers hover over the screen. Maybe people avoided this lounge because Picard *wanted* them to. Maybe they stayed away out of respect. But they hadn’t *always*. One of the board games in the cupboard had a name etched on the box, a name Will recognized.

Jack Crusher.

It wasn’t easy to hack into the Stargazer’s database, but Will had lots of practice. He pulled up Jack Crusher’s personnel file and stared at the photo for a second. Strong jaw, round face. He could see the resemblance to Wesley – really, it was just in the hair, straight and brown. Plain.

Not like Will at all. With a sigh, Will scrolled back through Jack's personal history. He would have attended the Academy together – then the Stargazer – then the sudden death, just last year. The mission details were locked, but Will knew without reading them that Picard himself had pulled the trigger. Maybe not literally, but one way or another, Picard had killed his best friend.

Will pulled up Jack's photo again. It shimmered into a hologram before him, face-to-face, real flesh opposite glitter-dust. Stagnant. It was only when a shadow fell over Will that he realized he wasn't alone.

"What are you doing?" said Picard, his voice low.

Will dragged his eyes away from Jack Crusher's face. Picard stood next to him, his face stormy and his fists clenched.

"Did you know his ancestors fought for the Confederacy at Bull Run?" Will asked. "Mine fought there too. For the Union." He paused, waited. "I don't know if you know much about the Old Americas—"

"Enough," said Picard. He took a step forward and his fist swung up, and before Will could stop himself, he was flinching – humiliated, face red, cringing in his seat. He froze there, head ducked, that unwelcome voice ringing in his ears, and barely felt it when Picard tugged the PADD out of his numb fingers.

"Will," said Picard, and there was a sudden lack of light as Jack's hologram fizzled out of existence, "Will, look at me."

His voice was heavy. Will couldn't look at him. Not until he regained control of his face. He curled his knees to his chest instead, rested his arms on top of them, and turned to face the window. He hid his burning left ear against his folded arms, and hoped his hair would hide the other one.

"Will," said Picard softly.

Will closed his eyes. Here was the issue: he knew how Beverly saw him. How Picard saw him. As a little kid. As a victim. It had been there, in their eyes, from the moment Beverly saw him at the medical tent on Ulmanon. It had been there, stronger than ever before, when they strapped him to the bio-bed and read his file. They liked him because of that. They felt sorry for him.

But they couldn't see the stuff he could. They didn't know the Will Riker who stole Ms. Tiefer's snow-skimmer and sold it for parts, who lied about it even when he saw her kids hiking miles through the snow. They didn't know the Will Riker who drowned Jean Ortiz's pet rabbit just because he couldn't have one of his own. They didn't know the Will Riker who hurled insults at his father, who went into every anbo-jyutsu match with the intent to cause serious damage, to kill – who once screamed at his dad for so long that his voice went hoarse, who fought back against a beating and beat his father instead, who knew exactly which weak emotional points to hit, how to use the memory of his mother to make his father cry.

They didn't know the Will Riker who snuck into his father's room at night and *asked* for it.

They don't know you, the voice said.

"Will," Picard murmured, and now there was a heavy hand on Will's shoulder, a gentle squeeze as long fingers curled around his biceps and held him tight. "Did you hack into the Stargazer's database?"

Silence. Will kept his head down. That hand on his shoulder shifted, Picard's thumb rubbing a circle into Will's arm.

"Look at me, please," Picard said.

Will forced himself to look. He could control his expression now. The memories of Kyle Riker had turned his eyes dry and his skin cool. Bored, he let Picard search his face – and he braced himself for whatever scolding he was about to get.

But instead, Picard said,

"I'd like you to try the skills test again."

He would never forget the sensation of Will's shoulder beneath his palm. Beneath the desk, his knees were trembling. He had to fold his hands between them, grind the knuckles against his knee bones, just to stop them from rattling loud enough for Will to hear. Picard's stomach twisted into an unhealthy knot as he watched Will work, chewing on the stylus end. He could still feel it. The heat of Will's skin. The ridge of bone, the flex of muscle under his clothing. People always felt more fragile than you expected them to, when you touched them over their clothes. But the last person he touched had been so different. The last person he touched had already gone cold.

"If I get a hundred percent," Will mused, "will you let me be an ensign?"

Picard clenched his hands into tight fists beneath the table. He dug his fingernails into his palms, trying to clear away the memory of Will's skin with a bite of pain. Clearing his throat, he said, "That's not how it works. You can't get a hundred percent on a skills test."

"Too bad."

"And I can't field-promote a teenage civilian to an ensign, either," Picard added as an afterthought.

"No? Why not?"

"It's not up to me," Picard said. "It's up to Starfleet. Perhaps I could promote you, but then it would be Starfleet's prerogative to send you to the Academy, or to an advanced training course for return officers. If your scores are high enough."

“Hmm,” said Will, his eyelids dipping.

“In any case, once you passed, they would send you to whichever ship they ascertained was best,” Picard said. His gaze drifted to the side, his chest tight. “It almost certainly would not be the Stargazer.”

“Bummer,” Will muttered. His tone was light, but his gaze lingered on Picard’s face just a touch too long, a hint of melancholy in his eyes. He returned to the skills test and tapped his stylus against the screen.

“Would you ... want to be stationed on the Stargazer?” asked Picard awkwardly.

For a moment, it was like Will didn’t hear. He kept his head down, hair falling over his eyes. There was the steady scratch of his stylus over the screen as he answered an essay question. Finally, he looked up, eyes smiling, lips serious.

“Would you want me here?” he asked, voice low.

Picard’s hands went cold. *Yes*, he thought, sitting up straight. And just as immediately, his face twitched and the knot in his stomach tightened, and he knew the real answer was ‘no.’ No, because the captain didn’t make friends; no, because the captain didn’t have family; no, because the captain’s observation lounge was meant to stand empty.

Will searched Picard’s face. The smile in his eyes drained away. He turned back to his test without a word.

“Will...” Picard started, choking on the word.

“I get it,” said Will.

“If you were under my command—”

“I get it,” said Will again, and when he looked up, when Picard saw the somber expression on his face, he knew that Will did. “You’re the captain. If I were stationed here, someday you might have to order me on an away mission, right? Knowing I might die. Or you might have to decide who goes into which escape pods, if the ship goes down. And you couldn’t make that decision without being biased.”

Picard’s heart was in his throat. He saw Jack’s face swimming before his eyes, felt the cold slick of sweat on his palms. Will kicked back on his chair’s hind legs and pointed out his own dimples.

“...because I’m too cute,” he said.

Picard’s breath left him in a rush.

“Take this seriously,” he said wearily.

“I am.” Will tipped his chair back down with a thump. His eyes glittered. “Let’s say this thing rates me as a chef. You need a chef?”

“We have replicators,” said Picard shortly.

“Yeah, and replicators *suck*,” said Will. “Me, I’ve been cooking since I was six. I bet I could turn that galley into Starfleet’s finest dine-in boutique.”

“William. Concentrate.”

Will waved Picard off and tapped out a few answers. “A chef would be a civilian,” he said idly.

Picard sighed. “You would still be under my command,” he said.

Will nodded absently. For a while, he seemed to focus on the skills test. Picard could see his eyes sharpening as he worked out a math equation, his index finger tracing images on the desk as he was quizzed on medicine and science. But soon the tip of the stylus was back in his mouth, clenched between his teeth, and his focus had drifted.

“This thing hasn’t asked me anything about blowjob technique,” he complained.

“That would be on the practical exam,” said Picard dryly.

“It’s a valid career, isn’t it?” Will persisted. His eyes flashed as he plucked the stylus out from his lips and twirled it over his knuckles instead. “Hey, that would solve a lot of problems, wouldn’t it?”

“What problems?” asked Picard, not sure he wanted to know.

Will’s lips tucked into a one-cornered grin. “Well,” he said in a drawl, “from where I’m sitting, the captain looks pretty damn pent-up.” He paused, letting this sink in. “Might be good for morale to have a courtesan around. Someone who’s not under your command.”

A vein throbbed in Picard’s temple. He kept his face studiously blank until Will turned back to the PADD. He didn’t think about the fragile warmth of Will’s shoulder beneath his hand. He didn’t think about the bio-bed, about Will’s fingers curling around his own for comfort. He didn’t think about that night he woke up, hard and sweating, sick to his stomach with need.

“It hasn’t asked me any questions about anal, either,” Will said, and Picard pushed to his feet. He didn’t miss the way Will froze at the sudden movement – the way his face shuttered and closed-off, a moment before he schooled himself, tried to look relaxed. Coy. Picard rounded the desk and stood at Will’s shoulder, staring down at the PADD.

He said nothing. Will kept his head down, his shoulders tight. Finally, fingers twitching, he darted a glance up at Picard.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice odd.

“I am supervising you,” said Picard patiently.

Will looked away. The stylus skittered out of his hand and clattered to the floor. “Why?” he asked.

“To ensure you give this test your full attention,” Picard said. He retrieved the stylus and forced it into Will’s unmoving fingers. That brief touch sent a spark up his spine, and he couldn’t hide the rush of heat to his face. He knew Will saw it too, because suddenly the tension dissipated. Back on familiar ground, Will relaxed.

“Stand closer,” he advised, clicking the button for the next question.

“I think this is close enough,” Picard said. He scanned the question. Hyper-space physics. Will chewed on his bottom lip as he worked out an answer.

The correct answer.

Picard’s shoulders eased down a notch. The next question was simpler. History. Will wavered between two different answers, both of them wrong. Not his strong suit, Picard guessed. But he handled music and mathematics like a charm, and he was a deft hand at all the engineering questions that came his way. Good spatial awareness, Picard noted, and a high logic matrix. And Picard had seen firsthand his piloting and leadership skills. He could have entered the Academy at fifteen instead of running away.

A new section unfolded. Linguistics. With a sigh, Will sped through the questions – terrible at the basic knowledge tests, like identifying parts of speech and translating from common tongues. But not bad, Picard noted, at the more innate skills – when the quiz asked him to study a set of made-up rules for nonexistent languages, and extrapolate a translation for any given line of gibberish, Will had a better than 50% shot at getting them right. That was how he picked up the local dialect on Ulmanon, Picard decided. Less training with languages than most Starfleet cadets, but enough mental flexibility to get by–

A message flashed across the screen. Will froze, his stylus hovering over the menu to dismiss it. But the stylus’ tip never came down. Instead, Will’s eyes fixated on the name written there, unblinking, his face smooth as glass.

Kyle Riker, it said.

Picard’s heart skipped a beat. He was back in sickbay, holding Will’s hand through the bio-bed railing; back in Beverly’s office, studying Kyle Riker’s file. Without hesitation, he leaned over Will’s shoulder and dismissed the message entirely. The skills test resumed, unanswered questions staring up at Will, but Will didn’t seem to see them. His jaw was slack. His eyes were hooded. He bore no expression at all.

He was locked up.

“Will?” Picard said softly.

Will blinked. He stared down at the screen like Kyle’s name was still there.

“You are under no obligation to answer him,” Picard said. He watched Will’s stylus-hand, but it didn’t so much as twitch. It was frozen in place, still hovering over the spot where Kyle’s message had been. “Will...?”

Will made a noise, an unsteady, “Uh...” Nothing more. And nothing more was coming, Picard could tell. He made a split-second decision. He leaned forward, tapped his authorization code into the PADD, and paused the skills test. It could be resumed later.

And then he touched Will.

Hesitantly at first – a hand on his arm, just to ground him. Then Picard grasped his hand and squeezed. He touched Will’s face, pulling closer, coaxing – and Will crumpled. He hid his face against Picard’s chest, fingers curled in loose fists at Picard’s waist, while Picard deleted the message from Kyle entirely.

He could feel Will trembling.

He was trembling, too.

And he could feel Will’s breath against his chest, short and shallow – and the tension in his arms as he clung to Picard’s tunic, as he burrowed his face deep into Picard’s shoulder. He could feel every touch like a burn: needles heated to a red-hot point, sinking into his skin: a discomfort so intense it crawled into his pores and curled up, balls of barbed-wire poking every sensitive untouchable part of him from within: a need to scream, to back away, to scratch his skin until it bled. To get rid of this sensation. Unwelcome touch.

It reached a crescendo.

It melted away.

It felt good.

Minutes later, maybe hours, when the tension in Will’s body bled away and he stopped shaking, he lifted his head, and Picard found themselves suddenly face-to-face. Will’s lips were inches from his own. Will’s breath was warm against his skin. He could count every dark eyelash, see his reflection in the pale blue of Will’s eyes.

And when Will leaned in for a kiss, Picard didn't stop him.

He kissed him back.

Although his surname didn't match, the boy at Starbase 32 had papers proving he was a Crusher. His little brother clung to his hand. His mother pointed him to the Starfleet recruitment office and let him take his time. There would be a home address for him to fill in when he submitted his scores, and a recommendation letter from Mr. Seong indicating his time spent in engineering, and a letter from the captain suggesting, gently, that the Stargazer be given first consideration when Will Riker graduated.

It wouldn't be, he knew. The Admiralty was never that kind to him. Will would be shuttled off to some new ship, likely the Pegasus or the Hood; he'd either be kicked out of the Academy in his first semester or he'd soar through the ranks fast enough to break Picard's own records. And Picard would never see him again.

But it didn't matter. From dock, he watched as the Crushers' shuttle left, and took Will Riker with him. Picard, alone in the observation lounge he used to share with Jack, watched them go and touched his lips. He hoped desperately that Will would never fall under his command. He hoped desperately that Will would.

He would always remember that kiss.

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