

When the Rain Slows

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When the Rain Slows

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Summary

There's nothing odd about the group of Humans who greets the Enterprise crew on Denali II. All of them are upstanding civilian scientists and strategists; none of them are dangerous.

So why is it, when Counselor Troi reads Commander Riker's emotions, all she senses is shame and fear?

Notes

The title comes from David Bowie's "Sunday."

This is a longer remix of Debra L. Taylor's "Too Close is Fear," from the 1991 fanzine Generation D. I read it recently, got obsessed, and wanted to write more! Some minor changes have been made, including why and how the Enterprise was called to Denali II, but I'm 100% in debt to Debra for this plot.

Chapter 1

Captain's Log, Stardate 43063.4

The Enterprise has received an urgent request for aid from an unusual source: Kyle Riker. In his capacity as a Federation consultant, Mr. Riker has urged us toward the Onias Sector in the Beta Quadrant, near Romulan territory. Here, with the help of a colonizing species from within the quadrant, the Federation has established a strategic outpost colony called Denali II. This so-called "science base" is of utmost importance in case of future hostilities from the Romulans – but if Mr. Riker is to be believed, Starfleet may have underestimated the existant racial biases between the Tritates and Yannites.

Denali II has broken out into war.

"Look's like the fighting's already over," Riker noted.

"A temporary stay, I'm sure," said Picard. It was rare for the captain to join the away team, and Riker wasn't happy about it; he had insisted they take a shuttle, rather than the transporter, so they have an extra means of escape just in case. Now he angled the shuttle over the outpost and squinted through the windshield at the rubble far below.

"I hope you like it cold, sir," Riker said cheerfully. "They don't call it Denali for nothing. Check out all that snow!"

Troi made eye contact with Picard, and it didn't take an empath to feel the amused exasperation coming off her. Riker's eyes had lit up as soon as he heard the colony's name, and now, with the snow-crusted tundra actually in sight, he was practically bouncing in his seat.

"Will your father be meeting us, Number One?" asked Picard.

"No, sir. He's not here." Riker tore his eyes away from the landscape reluctantly. "I checked with him before we left."

"He's not here?" Picard raised his eyebrows.

"Never been to Denali II in his life," Riker confirmed. "But he did call in the request. Called it a personal favor."

"Interesting." Picard adjusted his safety harness as the shuttle lowered, a push of energy scraping the bottom of the hull. It skimmed over the snow until it reached a cleared field, and then Riker set it down. The city was close by, melted snow turning dark earth into mud where the fires had taken place. A burnt-out ruin marked the entrance into town — the old schoolhouse. Picard eyed it as Riker popped the shuttle hatch and jumped down into the snow.

"It's freezing!" Troi complained. She held out her hand, expecting Riker to help her down, and sure enough, Riker was already waiting. He swung her down by the waist and offered a hand to the captain.

Picard just gave him a look.

"Wouldn't want to risk a sprained ankle, sir," said Riker, his eyes twinkling. Worf leaned past Picard and took the offered hand. "Worf—?" said Riker, surprised.

Worf leapt down from the shuttle and turned his grip on Riker into a perfectly-executed sunset flip.

"Never lower your guard, Commander," said Worf solemnly.

Riker sat up, spitting snow out of his mouth. "Noted." Picard barely noticed him; he had turned to graciously offer Dr. Crusher a hand down, and never mind that she was taller than him. When he released her, he pretended not to notice Riker's knowing stare.

"I propose we break into squads," said Picard.

"Agreed." Voice clipped, Riker gestured for Worf to side with the captain. "Beverly, with me. Counselor Troi, Mr. Worf—"

"Mr. Worf will go with you, Commander," said Picard firmly. "Counselor Troi, with me."

Riker raised an eyebrow. "Sir, security—"

"—will be far more useful in your project than in mine," Picard concluded.

Worf's face spasmed. "Captain, I protest—"

But Riker, sighing, was already on the line with the *Enterprise*. "Riker to Security," he said. "Can I get a two-man guard down here for Captain Picard?"

Worf whirled on Picard, his eyes gleaming with triumph. Picard waved his hand dismissively. "Do what you will, Number One—"

"I will."

"—but have them meet me at the town hall. I wouldn't want to delay our mission any further."

Riker shook his head at Troi. She clasped his forearm affectionately as she strode past, pushing through heavy drifts of snow to catch up with Picard. Neither of them knew how to walk on snow without sinking, and they hadn't made it far before Worf and Riker made beleaguered eye

contact.

“If they are hunted,” Worf rumbled, “they will surely die.”

“They’re not being hunted,” Beverly said, rolling her eyes. She clapped each man on the shoulder and steered them toward town. “Let’s go.”

Their first mission was hopefully the hardest they would ever have to do. But Beverly doubted it. She walked behind Riker, with Worf at her back, and her medikit clutched tight.

“We doubt there are any survivors,” said their guide, eyeing Beverly almost apologetically.

“Well,” said Riker, “if there are, we’ll be prepared.”

He met Beverly’s gaze over the guide’s shoulder and his eyes softened. Both of them knew that the bombed ruins of the hospital needed to be searched; and neither of them were very optimistic about what they’d find.

The first bodies weren’t worth checking. Beverly walked past, her eyes averted, searching the rubble for signs of life. Behind her, Riker crouched and checked the temperature of an arm trapped beneath a slab of duracrete. “Cold,” he muttered to Worf. And, with cool professionalism, he tugged a pair of sani-gloves over his hands and scooped the puddles of organic matter into a body bag.

“Lift the slab for me, Worf?” he requested.

Worf bent at the knees. He caught a slab by the edge and hurled it sideways with a grunt. Underneath, Beverly caught sight of three former patients, hopefully dead before the explosion. The slab had crushed them flat, rib cages splintered, skulls cracked. Riker eased the first one up as carefully as he could and met Beverly’s eyes.

He nodded for her to move on. But there was little point in being here. The more she crept through the ruins, tricorder sweeping for life signs, the clearer it became: no one here needed medical attention. Everyone was dead.

“Doctor Crusher!” Riker called.

Beverly turned on her heel. She’d wandered far from the squad, and now she has to pick her way through the rubble to find them again. Riker crouched near a spate of dead bodies, his elbows on his knees. Snowflakes stood out in his dark hair.

“Alive?” Beverly asked, her heart rate kicking up.

Riker glanced down at the dead. “No,” he said, “but a kid just came by—” He gestured to the right, where a boy of about nine was shifting from foot to foot. “—and said they’ve got some injured in Sector Three.”

Beverly looked the boy up and down. “Tritate?” she asked Riker in a low voice.

He nodded, eyes strained, studying the clan marking on the boy’s head. Although the local politicians claimed there were clear ethnic differences, that clan marking was the only way you could tell. This hospital was Tritate too; the dead bodies on the floor, for the most part, were Tritate, just like that boy. So maybe they could trust him. Or maybe he was trying to lure Beverly away. Riker rubbed sweat from the tip of his nose, using the exposed skin on his wrist rather than his dirty gloves, and went back to work.

“I should go…” said Beverly, hesitating.

“Not alone,” Riker muttered.

“But—”

“Do you have the comm code for the local council?” Riker asked.

Beverly shook her head. When he had the last body in a bag, Riker stood, working his gloves off and angling his shoulders so Beverly could access his badge. She tapped it for him.

“This is Commander Riker of the USS Enterprise,” he said flatly. “Current location: Tellum Med Center. Requesting a Tritate escort to Sector 3.”

“Copy,” said an unfamiliar voice. The boy edged closer, testing his bravery, while Riker swapped for a new pair of gloves and went back to work.

“What’s your name?” Beverly asked as the boy stepped closer.

He shied away immediately, staring down at his feet.

“Kal,” Riker supplied, eyes sparkling. “He told me earlier.” He tossed a pair of auto-seal gloves to Kal. “Put those on and hold the bag for me, kid.”

“Commander,” Beverly hissed.

“It’s fine.” And something in Riker’s eyes shifted, softened. “He’s seen plenty of dead.”

Something sharp lodged in Beverly’s gut and twisted there. The boy put the gloves on and flexed his fingers, delighted by the way the fabric shrunk to fit his hands. He stepped over the dead and their fluids like they weren’t there and crouched, barefoot, in the dirt, holding a body bag

open for Riker. Riker and Beverly noticed the boy's lack of shoes at the same time, too late to do anything about it.

"Where are your parents?" asked Beverly, her voice gentle, but the boy pretended not to hear. On the other side of the collapsed hospital, there was a crash of stone and wood as Worf cleared out another section, and a muffled grunt of disgust as he stepped in something that squelched.

"You know this area, Kal?" Riker said conversationally as he scooped up body parts.

"Uh-huh."

"You want to show me around? Help me get the lay of the land?"

Kal twitched the body bag a little wider. "Sure," he said. "What'll you pay me?"

"Warm meals," Riker said. "Place to sleep."

Kal gave him a narrow-eyed look.

"Teach you some card games," Riker said with a one-shouldered shrug.

"No thanks," said Kal with clear disdain. Then he glanced up, over Riker's shoulder, and dropped the body bag entirely. He scuttled into the shadows of the hospital as a group of Humans and Tritates came into view. Beverly stood up straight, her hand going to her hip holster. Riker pretended not to see them, but she knew he could. While he steadily continued work, he studied the newcomers from the corner of his eye, fingers dancing over the handle of his phaser.

"Commander Riker?" called a clear, Human voice.

Riker turned.

Introductions lasted forever. Captain Picard fixed a twinkle in his eye and forced a smile onto his lips as he shook hands. Troi trailed behind him, planting every name into her memory. She sampled their emotions as she went. It was good to get a preliminary taste, before tensions got high: see who was predisposed to each other, and who was too set in their ways to change.

As she reached the Federation liaison, she smiled a little wider and started to say her name.

"Counselor—"

And that was when it hit her.

Terror. Rage. Shame. A wave of emotion so staggering it inverted the oxygen in her lungs. She sucked in a breath, or tried to, but nothing came. Her chest was frozen; her face went pale. She felt a hand tight on her arm, heard a muddled voice from far away— "Counselor?" —and then the cold hard clink of stone beneath her knees.

"Counselor?" said Picard again, and Troi blinked.

Her vision cleared. The captain knelt before her, his hands on her biceps to steady her, his dark eyes scanning her face.

"Captain," said Troi, breathless. Her voice shook. "I—"

He must have sensed her hesitation, because he turned to the diplomats with a smile. "Just the thin air," he assured them. "If you'd give us a moment?"

They moved off, murmuring among themselves. A headache descended on Troi's temples, pressing straight through her skull into her brain. The after-effects of terror seized her rib cage. Her pulse was through the roof.

"One of ours," she whispered, so just Picard could hear.

He went eerily still. "Injured?" he asked, voice clipped.

Troi furrowed her eyebrows. "No. I sensed no pain. Just..." She forced herself to take a breath, to drive a wall between herself and the other party. With careful, slow movements, she stood, and Picard supported her all the way. "Captain," she said firmly, "let me recoup for a moment. I need some fresh air."

He eyed her closely. "Of course, Counselor. All the time you need."

He let her go. Unsteadily, Troi pushed through the dim hallway of the Grand Dukha and out into the light. In the distance, a transport engine thrummed across snow-rails, and just down the alley, a child's rubber ball made a hollow thumping noise as it dribbled on the pavement. She stumbled on wavering feet through the streets, past the smell of burning trash, children throwing shards of ice at a fat heating unit that hung out of a window, supported only by a two-by-four that had wedged between the bottom of the unit and the unforgiving concrete underneath. Tarps fluttered over broken windows, a harsh wind jerking at their corners.

And there, at the hospital, she found the source of all that terror, rage, and shame. He stood with his hands in his pockets, laughing at a stranger's jokes. How could he still be standing? Laughing? Just a taste of his emotion had driven Troi to her knees; she had never seen someone exude so much distress without crying, and here he was, returning jokes of his own, shaking hands.

But when he felt Troi coming, he froze.

“Deanna?” he said, slipping up. He turned and found her staggering toward him, and his face turned pale. Will rushed to steady her, warm hands closing around her arms. “Counselor!” he said, remembering himself. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

Imzadi, Deanna pushed at him, and Will went still. His eyes darted over her face, understanding now. His lips went thin. Just briefly, one of his broad hands cupped her cheek, and then he let her go.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, and even though she’d known from the start that it was him, it hurt her heart to hear him say it. “You should go back to the ship.”

“Will—”

He squeezed her hand and turned back to the Humans and Tritates assembled before him. “Counselor Troi,” he said, “this is Commander Havelock Urdu, Doctor Ruth Galvan, and civilian scientist Elissa Edwards. They’re serving as our guides.”

Troi managed a weak hello. She clutched at Will’s arm as soon as the others turned away again.

“Will—” she murmured.

“I’m fine,” he said, quieter than before. He did his best to project an emotion at her. Reassurance. Calm. “Go back to your post, Counselor,” he said.

But he couldn’t hide the sense of shame that curled around his organs, leaking into his skin. Deanna could feel it thrumming in her own pulse. It was in her headache, it was sinking into the sensitive nerve endings of her teeth.

He squeezed her hand one last time, his face composed and businesslike, and turned away. For a long moment, Troi just stood there, gathering her breath. She probed Beverly and Worf as unobtrusively as she could; both of them had noticed *something*, she could tell. Lingering touches of concern still tinged their auras. Troi focused on the local squad, on Urdu, Galvan, and Edwards.

They had noticed, too. From Urdu: a hint of wariness, contempt. Whatever he had seen – a sudden paleness, a tremor in Riker’s hands – it hadn’t endeared him to the commander. From Edwards, it was mostly disgust; she assumed Riker was sick, and she didn’t want him to get too close, but the longer she talked to him, the more the disgust faded. And from grandmotherly Ruth Galvan, there was nothing but concern.

So it was Ruth that Troi gravitated to. As Riker and the others set off, she caught Ruth’s arm.

“Not used to war, is he?” Ruth said, reading Troi’s mind. Troi’s face softened; she waited a little, to let the others get farther away.

“Will you keep an eye on him for me?” she asked. “I have to get back to Captain Picard, but...”

“Of course.” Ruth squeezed her hand: palm callused, nails dirty and clipped short. A weary smile tugged at her lips. “We humans have to stick together, no?”

Troi wasn’t human, of course. But she didn’t get the chance to correct Ruth, and she didn’t bother to set her right on Riker’s experience with war, either. She watched the old woman catch up with her colleagues. She should feel better, knowing that there was someone here to look after him while Beverly and Worf saw to their duties.

But somehow, it didn’t comfort her. She wished it were her instead.

Chapter 2

They left Beverly with the wounded – and a team of medics from the Enterprise, all armed with phasers, just in case. Riker and Worf returned to the ruins of the hospital alone.

Worf ... tolerated working with Commander Riker. He tolerated it quite well. The Human was too noisy some days, and had an inappropriate sense of how many jokes were permissible in a one-hour time limit. He laughed too much, and had a female's sensibilities re: touch – always clasping Worf's forearm or patting him on the shoulder. But he held up well in combat, and had a tenacity and appreciation for Klingon culture that Worf approved of.

Today, Riker was unusually silent. And Worf approved of that, too. They cleared the hospital one square foot at a time. Rubble, they piled along the east wall, close to the reclamator. Bodies, they bundled up as they discovered them, and left the bags in orderly rows to the west. Riker was fastidious about separating trash from organic matter; he moved in a crouch through a disease ward, his face like a mask, a respirator hooked over his nose so he could avoid inhaling anything harmful. Worf listened for a joke; there were none. So he listened for idle chatter; there was none of that, either.

At 1400, the silence broke.

"Let's break for lunch, Worf," Riker said, his voice muted behind the respirator. Worf abandoned the other end of the disease ward with a grunt. He joined Riker outside the ruins, where a makeshift sanitation unit was waiting for them, and one by one they disposed of their protective gear and stepped through the decontamination spray.

"We'll raze the rest of it," Riker said, settling onto a low stone wall. There were new bags beneath his eyes that hadn't been there when they beamed down. "Once we confirm there are no more remains, we can use our phasers – easier to start fresh, with a clear space."

Worf handed Riker a boxed lunch from the replicator, a mix of Klingon and Human food, and Riker set it aside. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, sweat trickling from his hair into his parka collar. Across the street, a mixed group of orphan kids were playing ball, their boots thumping against the rubber.

"You are neglecting your food, Commander," said Worf around a mouthful of gagh.

Riker didn't seem to hear. His weary eyes tracked the ball back and forth across the alleyway. Gradually, he slid his lunchbox over to Worf: an open invitation.

One of the boys – the boy from earlier – hopped from foot to foot, the snow chilling his soles. He aimed a clumsy kick at the ball, and it went wide.

"You missed!" another boy jeered.

"It's not fair," Kal whined. "I don't have my boots."

"What kind of pansy needs boots? It's not even winter!"

Riker rested his cheek on his chin with a silent sigh. Worf studied the boys' feet, silently approving of the thick cold-resistant hides that covered them. When Kal missed another goal, he crouched abruptly in the snow and covered his head with his shirt, his face hidden.

"Man, you suck!" one of his teammates said.

"I would've bombed us too for playing that bad," another kid agreed.

Kal growl-screamed from inside his shirt and stamped his bare foot against the snow, but refused to uncover his face. Ashamed, Worf supposed, or crying. He dipped his hand into Riker's lunchbox and popped a targh gibleet into his mouth, crushing it between his teeth. And then he froze, because as soon as Worf stole the gibleet, Riker shot to his feet.

"I'm going to..." Riker searched for a reason, his eyes cloudy. "...debrief the captain."

Worf swallowed the crushed gibleet, the rush of blood and gristle salty against his tongue. "Aye, sir," he managed as Riker stalked away. From a distance, he watched the commander move with grace across the snow: head bowed, shoulders tensed, hands shoved into the pockets of his parka. From behind, although Worf knew him to be Riker, he didn't look like Riker at all.

It would work. It was an alleyway. Dead-end. Deserted. The entrance, well, it was so heavily stacked with empty crates and broken heating units that it hardly looked like an entrance at all. No one would intrude on him here. Riker paced the length of it, his hands clenched into fists inside his pockets. He eyed a reclamator, its metal sides stained orange, and a tattered harp that hung from its side. A child's shelter? A hideout? He eased the tarp open with his foot and peeked inside. Snack food, dirty cushions, scratch-chips labeled 'adults only.' Definitely a kid's hideout, but nobody was in it right now, so Riker forced himself to take a breath and turned away.

He thumbed his combadge.

"Picard," came the captain's familiar voice, and Riker's lungs unfroze a little.

"You requested a preliminary report, sir?" he said.

"Indeed I did, Number One. You picked a good time to call. We've only just ended the first round of negotiations." Picard's voice lowered.

“Which were even less fruitful than I had expected.”

The words rolled off Riker without impact. He was mostly focused on his breathing: slow and steady. And on his balance. His right knee was a little wobbly. Couldn't say why. He kept his eyes focused on the wall, his vision a little blurry, and waited until Picard stopped talking.

“Number One?” Picard prompted.

“Sir.”

A hesitation. Riker needed his whole mind here, in the present, to figure out what that hesitation meant. But he couldn't force his brain to comply. Numb fingers tightened on the combadge.

“Your report, Number One,” Picard said.

“Sir.” Riker forced his leaden tongue to move. “It appears there's little to no tension between the Humans and the Tritates – they're working together to set up shelters for the unhoused and tend to the wounded. But I've yet to see any Yannites join the clean-up effort.” He paused, organizing his thoughts. “Worf and I have just about finished work on the old hospital. We plan to raze it within the next hour and set up a capsule med-tent in its place. Temporary, until full construction can begin. In the meantime, Doctor Crusher is hard at work treating the wounded, both Yannite and Tritate, and she reports no violence there.”

“Very good,” Picard said. Riker's eyes slid closed, his heart hammering in his chest. “Your schedule is your own judgment, Commander. I trust you to see to the local needs as you see fit.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Riker. Dispassionate. Clipped.

“Is there anything I can do?” Picard asked.

“No, sir. I've got it handled.” Professional. Calm.

“Very well. Picard out.”

The comm ended with a click, and eyes still closed, Riker jerked forward a step. His foot struck something – empty cans – kicked them hard against the wall, but he didn't open his eyes. He found the cool stone of the nearest building and rested his forehead against it. His breath came in sharp bursts through his teeth, each one with an audible sound he couldn't help, somewhere between a groan and a whine.

His stomach narrowed. His chest squeezed. He scraped his knuckles against the wall, his hands forming loose fists, and wished he could sink into it – into the cold surface – into stone. Unfeeling, immovable. No more lungs to pump for breath and no more heart clawing its way out of his chest. No more–

Riker bent at the waist with a sharp gasp and vomited on his boots. His stomach cramped, the lining folded, the half-digested food inside flipped; a chemical burn invaded his nasal passage and seared him to the roots. He opened teary eyes and stared uncomprehendingly at the blurry mess on his shoes. Dully, when his stomach calmed, he shoved his boots into the nearest snow drift and scraped the vomit away. Stomach still uneasy. Unacceptable. He leaned over, one hand clenched on the side of the rusty reclamator, the other's fingers pushing deep into his throat, until his gut was empty and the snow was splattered with bile, and he felt a little better, like he might not overheat or fall to his knees when he walked away.

Good. Acceptable. Best he could ask for.

He had work to do.

“Councilor Medgard,” said Picard wearily, “perhaps some concessions could be made–”

“Not for terrorists,” said Medgard.

“You may categorize the Yannite *adults* however you wish,” said Picard, “but the children surely cannot be labeled as terrorists. If you truly believed that, your security team would have cleared the courtyard hours ago.”

Outside, as if to prove his point, a mixed group of children screamed in delight. They were playing a chase game, boots thumping on the snow-cleared pathway. One child had climbed to the top of a light-fountain and clung there, twitching his feet out of the other children's grasp.

“As far as I am aware,” said Medgard with great dignity, “*those* children have not been charged with any crimes. The terrorists in Holding Cell Three *have*. That is precisely why I call them terrorists, Captain Picard; I do not choose my words frivolously.”

“What did they do?” asked Troi.

Medgard drew himself up. “They initiated a *strobe attack*,” he said.

Silence. Picard gauged the reactions of the other councilors to see whether he should be impressed. Most of them looked embarrassed.

“Forgive me,” he said, “but I'm unfamiliar with the term. A strobe attack...?”

“Flashing lights,” Medgard explained. “Yannite eyes are particularly sensitive to them. We don't get much sunlight here, you see, and the less-evolved are apt to faint if–”

“But the children in Holding Cell Three *are* Yannite, are they not?” said Picard. “Did they attack their own people?”

“They attacked *us*,” said Medgard shortly.

“To no effect?”

What a headache. At Councilor Medgard’s side, a Tritate with a bristling mustache rushed to assure Picard, “We will release the children immediately.”

Medgard snapped his teeth. “We will do no such thing!”

“One of the children is the Yannite chieftain’s nephew,” volunteered Councilor Pom.

“Is that true?” asked Troi, at the same time Picard said,

“They’re not called *chieftains*, Mr. Pom, they are called *senators* –”

And at the same time, past the courtyard, a shrill voice broke through the crisp cold air:

“HE IS DEAD! HE IS DEAD! AND IT’S MY FAULT!”

Picard sat up straight, all weariness forgotten. The one good thing he could say for Medgard was that he leapt to his feet as quick as any Starfleet officer would. He blocked the door for his fellow councilors and motioned for them to go around back. “Could be a lure,” he said, and the councilors looked to Picard.

“Best to go a different route,” Picard agreed, ushering them sideways. He peered out the window, but didn’t see anything, anyway. He nodded to Troi, each of them flanking the councilors, and breathed a silent thanks that for once they were dealing with ‘civilians’ who had more wartime experience than most Starfleet officers. They rounded the corner with their weapons drawn and set to stun.

And found themselves face-to-face with a crying child.

“It’s not your fault,” said a Human woman, about sixty, exasperated.

“It *is!*” the boy insisted. He didn’t notice the entourage of high-ranking civilians who had found him, but his companion did, and she shot them an apologetic look as she tried to quiet the boy.

“It’s just puke, Kal,” she said with strained patience. “No one is dead.”

“But it’s a *LOT* of puke!” Kal wailed. “And it’s in *my* alley!”

Picard turned back to the councilors, his eyebrows raised, and gestured to the meeting room with a smile. “Shall we?”

Some of them looked downright disappointed that there was nothing to shoot. They holstered their weapons – well, half of them did – and shuffled back inside. Alone together, just for a moment, Picard and Troi watched the Human woman and her young charge.

“Her name is Ruth,” Troi murmured. There were stress lines near her eyes that hadn’t been there before, and when she touched Picard’s forearm, he already knew what she was going to ask.

“Go,” he said.

She found him where the hospital used to be. The rubble was gone; the bodies too, and Riker’s hair was mussed from hard work and drying sweat. He was bent down when she first saw him, helping a squad of petty officers erect the new capsule medtent. But the petty officers waved him back, eager to look competent in front of a commander, and Riker stepped away. He wrapped his arms tight around his stomach as he watched them. Cheeks hollow, face pale, he still looked queasy.

Alright? Troi sent him.

He must have heard her, but he didn’t answer. He just turned away so she couldn’t see his face.

Chapter 3

About half of the security team was staying planet-side tonight. They'd been set up in open-room barracks with the local security forces – mostly a ragtag group of Tritates whose homes had been destroyed in the initial attacks. No better motivation to join the security forces than homelessness: at least you knew you'd have a bed to sleep in every night, and meals so long as there was food for the taking.

Picard closed his PADD. In the sudden darkness, he rubbed his eyes and willed the itch of exhaustion to go away. He checked his chrono – almost midnight – and tapped his combadge.

“Bout time you called, sir,” came Chief O'Brien's reproving voice. “One to transport?”

“Belay that, Chief,” said Picard. His voice came out scratchy, and all he could think of was how much longer his morning routine would take if he started it on the Enterprise and ended it here. How little sleep he would get. “I'll be camping out planetside for tonight,” Picard said.

A pause. A trill of electronics.

“You'll alert the security team, sir?” O'Brien checked.

The terrible thing about being a captain was that, just as you clawed your way up to authority, your underlings decided you needed babysat. “I will inform anyone who needs informed,” said Picard.

Another pause.

“I see Commander Riker is still down there,” said O'Brien grudgingly. To Picard's ears, it sounded very much like, *If your dad says it's okay...*

“Thank you, Mister O'Brien,” said Picard, his patience wearing thin. “Picard out.”

He sighed into the silence. He didn't bother to turn the lights on. There were fold-out cots stacked against the back wall of his makeshift office – extras, stored here just in case a new recruit came in during the night. Picard set one up, a little dismayed by the flat pillow, the scratchy army-issue blanket. He hung his uniform jacket on the doorknob and settled into bed, fully-dressed against the cold.

Like any good officer, Picard was asleep within seconds.

And like any good officer, the moment he heard footsteps outside his door, he awoke again. His eyes opened; he didn't move; he was too vigilant to make a move without assessing the threat first. Still outside. A familiar tread. Picard sat up slowly, his abs protesting, and when the office door slid open, he was upright in bed, arms crossed, face set in a scowl.

“Number One,” he said, and Riker faltered, his eyebrows shooting up. “I assure you, I do not need an escort–”

“Sir, I–” Riker closed his mouth. They stared at each other, Picard with one eyebrow raised, waiting for a justification. But Riker's shoulders relaxed an inch or two – some might call it a slump – and he let his hand fall. “Sorry, sir. I'll let you get back to sleep.”

Riker spun on his heel, and Picard's sour expression faded. This wasn't what he expected. He flicked the blanket off his lap and called, “Number One!”

Reluctantly, Riker turned back. “Sir?”

“Explain yourself.”

A long-suffering expression snuck into Riker's eyes. “Awful lot of snoring out here, sir,” he said. “I didn't realize you'd already called dibs on the office.”

“O'Brien didn't put you up to this?” Picard asked.

It was only then that Riker's combadge squawked. He gave Picard a ‘wait one’ gesture and turned slightly away. “Riker here,” he said, tapping the badge.

“Just letting you know, sir–” came O'Brien's voice. “--that Captain Picard has elected to stay planet-side.”

Riker shot Picard a look. “Noted, O'Brien.”

“I did try to convince him otherwise, sir.”

“I'm sure.” Riker ended the call. He stood just outside the doorway, halfway illuminated by the barracks' red lights. The other half of him, namely his face, was cast in shadow. He looked at Picard, lips parted, ready to say something.

Picard beat him to it. With a yawn, he moved back to his cot. “Come inside, Number One, and close the door behind you.”

Riker scuttled inside. “Sir?”

“There are extra cots against the wall.” Picard lay down, pulling the blanket up to his chest. “God knows I wouldn't want to sleep out there, either.”

There was a clank of aluminum as Riker unfolded a cot. “They say the red lights don't impact your sleep quality at all,” he said, sounding

amused. Picard muttered exactly what he thought of that while Riker located a pillow. "It'll be better in here, anyway," Riker said to himself.

Picard squeezed his eyes shut.

"Easier to keep an eye on you," Riker said.

"Thank you, Number One, goodnight," said Picard, his voice tight.

He heard a low chuckle, a creak of the cot as Riker lay down. He was asleep in seconds, far too fast to notice the way Riker turned to face the door, the strain in his eyes. And Picard's breathing was slow and even, with just the slightest hints of a snore, when Riker stood on silent feet and crossed the room.

He locked the door.

The various away teams met early the next day, just before sunrise. Bleary-eyed, with many of the males neglecting to shave, they lined up before Dr. Crusher for a quick med-scan. Riker stood off to the side, eyeing the local food stands, where elderly Tritates were getting ready for a busy morning of customers. The smell of baking bread and sizzling meat filled the air, but Riker looked unusually bored by it, missing the usual sparkle in his eye.

"Anywhere you want to try?" Troi asked in a low voice, nudging him. He shifted out of her reach.

"Hm?" he asked.

"You've been eyeing those meat buns for twenty minutes," Troi said.

Riker managed a smile at that, even if it was a distracted one. "Trying to figure out how they're made," he muttered. He turned his attention back to Beverly, whose eyes were dark.

"I'm not liking this air quality, Captain," she said sternly. She kept her gaze locked on her medscanner as she walked down the line, tapping each crew member's combadge. "I'm setting your badges to read and report all bio-metrics throughout the day. And everyone here is going to wear an oxygen mask the second you get breathless, understood?"

She smacked Riker's combadge, took a step forward, and froze. Eyebrows furrowed, Beverly finished up the rest of the away squad as if nothing had happened. But when Picard dismissed them to find breakfast and report for their assignments, Beverly put a hand on Riker's arm, silently ordering him to wait.

"Your heart rate is high," she said in a murmur as the squads dispersed. "Blood pressure, too."

"Anything I should be concerned about?" asked Riker.

"Will," said Troi, "if Beverly is telling you about it, then I think it's worth being concerned."

He broadcast a wave of amusement toward her. Beverly, with her eyes on the medscanner, didn't seem to notice the conversation at all. She studied Riker's readings and slotted a hypospray canister into the dispenser.

"I'm not seeing any physical cause for it," she said, standing on tiptoe to press it against Riker's neck. "This is an anxiolytic. It will lower your heart rate and maybe do something about that nausea."

A flare of discomfort reached Riker's face. "I'm not nauseous," he said.

"Tell that to your esophageal lining," Beverly said, waving her medscanner. "If you throw up again, come find me. Don't try to hide it in the snow."

Riker rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to hide the deep blush that had blossomed in his cheeks. He kept his head down until Beverly was out of earshot. She and Picard both drifted down an alleyway, in pursuit of the smell of coffee – or something like coffee. Troi and Riker stayed behind. She waited, sampling his feelings, until the embarrassment had cooled.

"An anxiolytic," Troi mused. "Have you been feeling anxious, Will?"

He gave her a dark look at that. "You would know," he said with little rancor.

"I suppose I would." She searched his face, her heart aching. "Will. You can talk to me."

"I know." But his hands were in his pockets again, his shoulders stiff. He turned away. "I have work to do—"

She caught his arm. Forced him to stop. He didn't quite meet her eyes.

"You had six nightmares last night," Troi said, pronouncing the words slowly, carefully. Without judgment. "Six."

Her fingers had found his. She twined them together, squeezed a little, tried to tell him without words that she was listening. But Riker shifted his grip and raised her hand to his lips. He kissed her knuckles, offered her a gentle smile – just his eyes – and let her go.

"I have work to do, *Imzadi*," he said.

The local structures needed to be reinforced. This was simple work; the kind of back-breaking, mindless duty that almost doubled as combat

training. Worf relished it. Not just for the salt-sweat on his brow or the ache in his muscles: he relished it because it was just hard enough to keep Commander Riker from chatting.

They worked in silence.

“Over there,” Riker said at 1000, nodding toward a rubbish pile. He and Worf took the discarded support beams in their arms and lugged them onto the trash. At 1300, Riker said, “Water break,” voice clipped. He didn’t make eye contact with Worf; he just stood there, the wind cutting his parka and wrapping it around his ribs; he drank from the water bottle, eyes dark, and watched the trees.

At 1500, Riker said, “Okay?” after a beam caught Worf’s fingers when it fell.

“Okay,” Worf grunted back, and that was all.

What had seemed like an honorable silence at 0800 became downright concerning by midday. Worf sneaked occasional glances at Riker. He seemed subdued. No, thoughtful. And in Worf’s experience, it was highly unusual to see a ‘thoughtful’ Commander Riker. He was a man of action; a quick leader who processed situations and did not hesitate to implement situations; this was why he fit in so well on a Klingon ship, and by ‘fit in’, Worf meant ‘survived.’

He was still surreptitiously studying Commander Riker when they took their final break. Leaning together against the wall, hands in pockets to protect them from the cold, Worf and Riker stared out at the trees. Children played on the edge of the forest, shouting at each other over the wind. Riker’s eyes narrowed; gradually, he lowered his head and stared at his feet instead. Maybe it was just to protect his exposed face from the breeze.

“Worf,” said Riker suddenly, and then hesitated. Worf turned to face him, his senses on edge.

“Yes, Commander?”

Reluctantly, Riker met his gaze. Sunlight sparkled off the snow and flashed in Riker’s eyes, giving them a glassy sheen that struck at some deep instinct inside Worf – it was uncanny, he decided, for someone to look straight at you; and even more uncanny when you got the sense they couldn’t see you when they did. Riker bit his lip, his gaze skittering away.

“What do Klingons do,” he asked finally, “when an adult ... interferes with a child?”

In the distance, bark crackled and ripped as a child slipped from the tree. His playmates whooped and rushed forward to catch him.

“The perpetrator is killed,” Worf said. “Swiftly.” He showed his teeth. “And savagely.”

He expected Riker to smile at that, but Riker just kept staring at his feet, his eyes dull.

“Do you think that’s right?” he asked. Over the wind, his voice was almost inaudible. Worf shrugged.

“What do Humans do?” he asked.

Riker glanced up at the playing children, his eyes strained. Worf waited for an answer, and when none came, he distracted himself with a nutrient bar. There was no telling if Commander Riker would call it a day soon or – in a mood like this – if he might keep going till midnight. And if he kept going, then Worf would be honor-bound to join him. Best to stock up on calories, just in case. He chewed mechanically, sharp teeth digging into the rubbery surface of the bar.

“Worf,” said Riker, “when all this is done, do you want to spar afterward?”

Worf paused mid-chew. “Today?” he asked, pushing a wad of unswallowed food into his cheek.

“Yeah.”

He considered. The work alone was plenty exhausting for a Human. To add a Klingon sparring match on top of that might just be dangerous. But if Riker wanted to...

“That would be ... acceptable,” Worf said, and finally, a hint of life entered Riker’s eyes. He slapped Worf on the shoulder and pushed off from the wall.

“Good! You ready to work?”

Sour-faced, Worf choked down the rest of his nutrient bar in one gulp.

“Again,” Riker said, and their second match ended with Riker flat on his back, winded, his hair covered in snow.

“Again,” Riker said, and ice against skin left a raw burn, a red patch where Worf had shoved his face against the ground and pinned him.

“Again,” Riker said, and when it was over, he spat blood on the snow and touched his nose gingerly, checking if it was broken. Worf watched him. The commander swayed a little, and dropped pragmatically to one knee, his face creased with concentration. There was a distinct click as he pushed something back into place. “I think I’m okay,” he said. He got to his feet with a wobble.

There was a purple bruise forming on his left eye. Blood streaked his beard. Scrapes mottled his skin. Melted snow and drying blood had turned his hair stiff and wet. He got into position, knuckles bleeding, and waited for the first blow.

“Enough,” Worf said. He brought his heels together, the ceremonial end position for a sparring match. Surprised, Riker dropped his hands.

“What, you’re tired?” Then his face darkened. “I’m fine, Worf. Don’t worry about me.”

“I am not concerned for you,” said Worf stiffly, even as Riker raised his hands again. “I am—” Kahless, it hurt him to say this; it hurt him deeply. “--merely concerned about my own stamina, for the day ahead of us.”

“We’ll sleep before then,” said Riker dismissively, but he gave it up. He wiped the blood from his nose. Head down, bundled in a parka, he looked oddly small. He eyed Worf over his own knuckles, face soft.

Don’t thank me, Worf thought. After claiming to be *too weak* to fight another round, he couldn’t stand to be *thanked* too. His warrior’s pride would not allow it. But Riker’s eyes crinkled in a smile and all he said was,

“How bad did it hurt to give me that out?”

“It was agony,” Worf said. Riker gave an exhausted chuckle.

“Well, thanks for humoring me,” he said. “Do me a favor?”

Worf grunted ... and watched with a beady eye as Riker turned his bio-metric reader back on. With a wink, Riker said,

“Don’t tell Doctor Crusher.”

He didn’t wait for a yes. He brushed past Worf with his head held high, more relaxed than earlier. More loose. But he staggered, and when he got close enough to the nearest building, he walked with his hand trailing on the wall. Worf watched him go. The commander, he decided, *looked* smaller because he *was* smaller – because he hadn’t been eating enough. They had worked together all day yesterday, and all day today. They slept in the same open-room barracks.

He hadn’t seen Riker eat once.

The third night, Picard slept on the ship, and Troi stayed planetside.

She didn’t know their situations were reversed. They hadn’t planned it. But some internal sense compelled her to stay below. She went to bed while Riker was still outside, his silhouette visible through the foggy window glass, against the snow. He was sharing a drink in the cold with some of the local workers; they bowed their heads over a game of cards, numb fingers struggling to perform a Corgi shuffle. Riker’s gentle voice, low and unintelligible through the walls, lulled Troi to sleep.

Hours later, with a flash of terror, Troi woke.

She sat up straight, so fast she almost hit her head against the bunk above her. Heart pounding, Troi held her breath and listened. Terror faded. Shame crept in. Slow and steady, all emotion leaked away. Only exhaustion was left: muted, weary, ready to sleep – and none of these emotions were her own. Troi glanced around, the red lights illuminating sleeping soldiers all over the barracks. She climbed down from the middle bunk and padded barefoot across the hall.

Picard’s makeshift office was closed. A Starfleet digi-lock denied Troi access.

“Medical override: Counselor Troi,” she whispered.

The doors hissed open. The light didn’t reach inside ... but still, Troi thought she could see Riker clear as day. It was their empathic bond: it lit him up, allowed her to see the shift of muscles, the palm that passed tiredly over his eyes. When the doors closed behind her and darkness devoured them both, Troi took just one step closer.

“Medical override?” he asked, his voice rusty. “Really, Counselor?”

At least he sounded amused. He didn’t *feel* it, but he was okay enough to fake it. Troi let her breath out in a sigh and sat on the edge of his bed, close enough to feel his warmth.

“Did you have a nightmare?” she asked.

“No,” he said automatically. In the darkness, Troi saw him blink: a skin sliding shut over the light in his eyes. “Yes,” he admitted. “But I’m fine.”

She laid a hand flat on his upper arm and pushed. Obediently, Riker shifted to the side, leaving enough room on the side of the cot for her. Troi slid into place, into his warmth, intoxicating. Her hand rested on his chest, palm flat over his heart, fingers splayed, absorbing his erratic pulse as it slowed down. A sigh pushed out from between Riker’s teeth. What would it be? Troi wondered: an honest conversation, or small talk?

“Beverly’s planning a toy drive,” Riker said to the shadows.

Small talk it is, then, Troi thought.

“Not *really* a toy drive,” Riker amended. “She’s commandeered an extra replicator for them to use. Her plan is to station a few petty officers there – Henley and Croix.”

“Artists,” Troi said.

“Yes. The kids get to design their own toys. Henley and Croix will help.”

Silence. A shallow breath in; a slow sigh out.

“It’s a good idea,” Deanna ventured.

Will made a noncommittal hum.

“You don’t think so? A lot of them lost their toys in the war,” Deanna said. “Their homes. Their parents.”

“It’s a fine idea,” said Will, but there was a thorny tension in his voice that suggested otherwise.

“But...?” Deanna led him.

He glared at her from the corner of his eye. Knowingly. “But,” he relented, “I saw the sign-up list. There are kids as old as thirteen, fourteen, lining up for free teddy bears.”

Deanna smacked him heartily on the chest, earning an ‘oof!’

“So let them!” she said. “You awful sourpuss.”

Will massaged his chest. “It doesn’t strike you as a little strange?” he asked.

“I know for a fact there are grown men and women on the *Enterprise* who have stuffed animals in their bedrooms,” Deanna said. She eyed Will, and risked a poke to the cheek. “I’m sure you’ve seen plenty. You’ve been in more bedrooms than I have.”

“Low blow.”

“Compliment,” said Deanna innocently. But she felt the undercurrent of emotion – a genuine hurt, surprising but real. She examined it, circled the wound, and backed away. “Will,” she said, more seriously now, “these kids have just lived through a civil war. They could use a little comfort, don’t you think?”

A grunt.

“Even untraumatized people often keep their favorite toys into adulthood.”

Another grunt.

“Don’t you have any?” Deanna asked.

Will laughed a little at that. “No, I don’t have any,” he said, sounding practically scandalized. “My dad burned all my toys when I was ... God, I couldn’t have been older than ten.”

“He *burned* your toys?” Deanna repeated in a whisper-shout, sitting up on her elbows. “When you were *ten*?”

Will gave a strained smile at her indignation. “He said if I was old enough to stay home by myself, I was old enough to throw away my toys.”

“You were staying home by yourself at *ten*?” Deanna said.

“Oh, please, ten is plenty old enough.”

“By yourself while he went off on Starfleet missions,” Deanna clarified, her eyebrows raised. “By yourself for months, in the Alaskan wilderness, too young to drive the snow-skimmer, with no one to cook you meals or – or see to the heating unit if it broke down?”

Will caught her hand. “I survived, didn’t I?”

“Will, you were *ten*!”

In the darkness, stark new lines stood out on Will’s face. His voice, when it came, was harsh and low. “Yes,” he said, dropping Deanna’s hand, “I was, and there’s damned little I can thank that man for, Deanna. So let me have that.”

Deanna was shocked into silence. She stared at Will, at his dark, glittering eyes, uncomprehending. *Thank that man* – thank Kyle Riker? For what? For leaving him alone? All the time she’d known Will, all his hurt and anger surrounding Kyle had centered on being left alone. Now he claimed he liked it. Deanna hesitated, touched his hand.

“Will, I–”

“I was old enough,” Will said shortly. “I wanted to.” He rolled over abruptly, facing the wall. He whispered something she couldn’t hear – an oath, a swear – and ground the heel of his palm into his eyes. “Can you go back to your own bed?” he grumbled.

She felt his sting of regret as soon as she stood up. Not because he wanted her to stay – Deanna could tell that he didn’t. But because he could feel her hurt emanating through their bond as surely as she could feel his. He caught her fingers before she left, squeezed them once, gently. An apology without words.

“Will...” Deanna said, her heart aching. He let her go, his hand slipping back into the shadows.

“Go to sleep,” he said.

Chapter 4

They all took lunch together that day: civilians, Starfleet, Tritates and Yannites. But Picard only got the briefest glimpse of his first officer. There, on the far side of the courtyard, whittled to the bone, with scrapes – or wind-burn? – turning his cheeks red. Riker took a cup from the replicator, exchanged a word with Worf, a nod with Troi...

And then the crowd closed up around him and he was gone.

“Your commander,” said Urdu, his voice rumbling across the table. “He is unwell?”

Picard cocked his head, pretending not to understand.

“A wasting sickness,” Urdu suggested. “It was common here, many decades ago, before the vaccines.”

“No,” said Picard politely, “he is not ill.” And he sipped his tea, eyes cast aside, to make it clear he wasn’t interested in more questions. Troi sat down on his side, perhaps sensing the tension emanating from him, and placed her plate right next to Urdu’s.

“He looks malnourished,” Councilor Medgard said.

“Maybe the local food doesn’t agree with him,” said Troi innocently, pushing a spoonful of chocolate mousse between her lips.

It was a wise thing to say, and delivered with just the right amount of coyness. It set off a fierce, good-natured debate between Medgard and Urdu about the local cuisine, each of them turning occasionally to recommend his favorite restaurants to Troi. Elissa Edwards interjected with a brash, “It’s all alien gunk to me,” that offended Picard’s Starfleet sensibilities, but made both Medgard and Urdu laugh. Ruth just shook her head, smiling tolerantly, and kept her mouth shut.

“Tell me,” said Picard, “how did Denali II get its name? It was colonized by Tritates, yes?”

“Ah,” said Medgard, switching subjects with delight. “It was, indeed. By a mixed group of Tritates, Humans, and Yannites, yes. Our homeworld, as you know, is very similar in climate. We are uniquely evolved to cope with a tundra world such as this. When the Federation needed terraformers, we were the obvious choice.”

“I see. Then you did not choose the name.” And few Humans had stayed here, Picard thought.

“We may not have *chosen* it,” said Medgard, “but it is not without significance to us. You see, in the old Yannite dialect, ‘denali’ means ‘explore.’”

Councilor Pom made a noise of disagreement. “It’s more like, ‘get out of here,’” he said. “And a true Tritate would not use the Yannite word for this planet anyway.”

Which started a head-splitting argument that Picard didn’t even want to follow. He made weary eye contact with Troi, and across the table, with Ruth Galvan, who didn’t seem to share his amusement. The severe look on her face made Picard’s stomach drop. Ten minutes later, when the conversation died and the crowd thinned, Picard found himself and Troi alone. Only Ruth remained, her eyes down and her lips tight. Troi flicked a glance at Picard; he gave a slight nod.

Something was bothering Ruth. It didn’t take an empath to tell. But he relied on Troi to tell him when to speak, and when she nudged his foot beneath the table, Picard cleared his throat.

“You’re ... from Earth, originally?” he asked.

Ruth glanced up, her eyes strained. She smiled a little. “Yes,” she said. “You as well?”

“France.”

“North America,” she offered. “A place not unlike Denali II, actually.” She glanced out at the crowd with a sigh. “My husband liked the cold weather; he would have loved it here.”

At Picard’s side, Troi tilted her head just slightly to the side. This wasn’t the root of the problem, then. Picard stayed silent, his condolences – *husband, past tense* – stuck between his teeth. Ruth folded her hands before her lips, her brow creasing. Food abandoned, she stared hard at a spot on the table, refusing to look Picard or Troi in the eye.

“You were talking,” she said slowly, “about Commander Riker?”

Picard and Troi exchanged a glance. Hesitating, Ruth pulled her chair closer and lowered her voice.

“I was working with him this morning,” she said. She sneaked a look to the side, making sure no one was in earshot. “I... smelled alcohol on his breath.”

The sounds of the cafeteria rushed against Picard’s eardrums and dissolved there, leaving nothing but his heartbeat behind.

“I knew his father, you know,” said Ruth, her eyes pained. “Kyle Riker doesn’t drink on the job. I have a hard time believing *Will* Riker does. But I know what I smelled.”

Picard forced his face into neutrality. Beside him, Troi had gone still, her expression far too open, her hands clasped in her lap.

“Thank you, Dr. Galvan,” Picard said. “For letting us know.”

She searched his face – looking for a clue, Picard thought, of what would happen to Will next. He could see it in her eyes, that she wanted to ask for some leniency – some forgiveness. But she didn’t. She nodded to him once, in thanks, and walked away.

As one, Picard and Troi let out a sigh. She covered her face, delicate fingers lined up against her brow. Picard longed to do the same. But not here, where anyone could see him. He sat back in his chair instead, straightened his tunic, tucked his chin against his chest.

“Does he always use this replicator?” he asked in a murmur.

Troi squinted across the room at the replicator, her eyes strained. “Yes,” she said, “I think so.”

Picard nodded to himself. He watched the room subtly, waiting for it to clear. Assignments were going out now; outside, silhouetted, he could see Commander Riker issuing orders to the first few ensigns who trailed into the snow. Did he look drunk? Exhausted, yes. He hadn’t styled his hair this morning; it hung over his forehead, limp and tangled, like he’d misplaced his comb. Worf said the bruises came from sparring, and Picard wanted to trust him – didn’t want to believe his first officer would get into an unreported fight. But after listening to Ruth’s report, he wasn’t sure.

The locals trickled out. Picard gave it another minute before he stood. Across the room, unnoticed by the few people left, he checked the replicator. With Troi at his side – standing watch and blocking him from view – Picard input his access code.

“Command Override: Captain Picard,” he said. Leaning on the counter, he lowered his voice a little, and said, “Show me Commander William Riker’s replicant requests for the last five days.”

The screen lit up. Troi shifted closer, reading the list over Picard’s shoulder. Riker’s food requests had petered out entirely two days ago. Today alone, he had requested three whiskeys and two brandies – all before lunch. Troi bit down on her thumbnail, her face tight.

“Synthehol,” Picard muttered, banishing the screen.

“There’s that, at least,” said Troi, her voice heavy. Together, they glanced out the nearest window. Riker stood with his hands in his pockets, laughing at the local children as they pummeled him with snowballs. He didn’t look drunk. His eyes were sharp, his balance good. He twisted at the hips to avoid a snowball to the face, and got three to the back instead.

“Captain?” Troi prompted.

Picard hesitated. “Is this his usual diet, Counselor?”

“Would I know?” Troi asked, a little pointedly. Chastised, Picard waited for an answer. “I highly doubt it,” Troi said. “But five drinks before noon is...”

“Most of his consumption has been at night,” Picard noted, glancing at the darkened screen. This didn’t seem to comfort Troi. It certainly didn’t comfort him. Outside, Riker ducked a snowball; it missed his eyes and exploded in his hair, and when he roared in mock-rage at the children and spread his arms, they fled. But they fled laughing.

“He can shake off the effects at any time,” Troi said reluctantly.

“Yes,” Picard allowed.

“The least we can do is limit his access,” Troi suggested, nodding toward the replicator.

Picard’s lips lifted in a half-hearted smile. “Is that your medical opinion, Counselor?”

Troi stayed silent. Picard opened the access screen, his command code keyed in, ready to restrict ... but then he let his hand fall. With a sigh, he shook his head.

“Limit him to what, Counselor?” he asked. “Is there any appreciable difference between ten synthehol drinks and three?”

“He’s abusing it,” said Troi, her eyes pained.

“To what end?” Picard crossed his arms. “He isn’t eating. But he is no more abusing synthehol than is Ensign Wheeler, who had a single drink with lunch. Under what grounds do we restrict him?”

“This is a mission,” Troi said. “If he’s not sharp–”

“If we restrict Commander Riker’s access during missions, we must restrict everyone’s,” said Picard firmly, “and the entire point of synthehol, Counselor, is that we can drink aboard our ship and shake off the effects instantly, in the case of a red alert.” He sighed through his nose. His fingers danced over the screen.

“What, then?” asked Troi, her voice clipped, near-insubordinate.

“I’ve edited his parameters,” Picard said. “He can order as much synthehol as he wants, but it won’t dispense a single drop until he selects one food item to go along with it.” He met Troi’s eyes and gave a weary shrug.

“It’s worth a try,” she agreed quietly. “But Captain... I’m worried for him.”

As *am I*, Picard thought. He glanced out the window. The squadrons had dispersed; Commander Riker was nowhere to be seen.

“This is his last day planetside,” Picard decided. “Counselor, when his duties are done for today, I’d like you to take him back aboard the Enterprise for a psychiatric evaluation.”

Silence. Troi’s dark eyes flickered, her lips a thin line. Outside, a light snow began to fall, fat flakes that covered up the children’s footprints and gathered on the window sill.

“He won’t like it,” said Troi. “Leaving you here.”

“I know,” Picard said simply. “I rather expect a fight.”

But he stared out at the trampled snow where the children had ambushed Riker, where he’d laughed and taken their blows – and he decided it was worth it.

“I will bring your meal, Commander,” said Worf firmly.

Riker glanced up in surprise. Worf had deliberately failed to close the line down for dinner, and there were still local parents queued up to the corner, waiting to speak to Riker and receive their housing PADDs.

“Give me a minute,” said Riker, his eyes flicking sideways. “I can get it myself.”

“It would be inefficient,” Worf insisted.

He wasn’t going to let Riker win this one. It was too strategically planned. They weren’t doing the sort of physical labor that Worf excelled at; his ‘bedside manner’, so to speak, would be better spent fetching sustenance than comforting the unhoused. Giving Riker no time to argue, Worf set off for the nearest replicator.

What did Humans eat when they were ... unwell? Worf shouldered his way to the front of the replicator line. Borscht. Dried fish. Kolduny potato pancakes. He balanced a heavy tray in one hand and wove through the crowd, back to the housing line. One of the petty officers had subtly disobeyed Riker by putting up a sign – LINE CLOSED – and was busy shooing locals away.

“I didn’t take you for a French toast kind of guy,” said Riker with a brief glance at Worf’s tray.

“This is genki,” said Worf, bristling.

“I know, Worf. I’m just joking.” Riker wrinkled his nose. “Borscht?”

“Three-pepper borscht,” Worf said, his chest swelling.

“Leave it to you to choose something light,” said Riker wryly. He pushed his chair in so Worf could squeeze past him and tugged the tray a little closer, sharp eyes darting over its contents. He poked the dried fish. “They don’t sell *this* at the 5-Tsar Eatery in Anchorage.”

Worf was still processing that pun when Riker snagged a pelmeni dumpling and hopped it from hand to hand, getting his fingers greasy. He bit down on a corner, tearing off the near-translucent dough and spilling ground pork and cabbage on his open palm.

Riker chewed that single bite twelve times. His eyes roamed the snow fields, hooded and distant. He placed the uneaten dumpling on an empty plate and left it there, untouched except for that one bite. He turned to his PADD, still chewing.

“Eat,” Worf said in a growl.

Riker raised his eyebrows. “Was that an order, Lieutenant?”

“You can have the other half of my sandwich, sir,” Petty Officer Ulrich piped up. “If you don’t like Russian food—”

“I’m Alaskan, Petty Officer. I like Russian food just fine.” Riker eyed the sandwich like it might bite him. “I’m fine, thank you.” And to Worf: “I’m just not very hungry.”

“Your sparring injuries will not heal properly without meat,” Worf said.

“My *sparring injuries* consist of bruises and scrapes,” said Riker. “I think I’ll be fine.”

They both sensed Ensign Wheeler heading toward them, and Riker effectively cut Worf’s response off by turning to the ensign ahead of time.

“Ensign,” he said pleasantly.

“Sir.” Ensign Wheeler set an overlaid tray down on the table. Warm, clear soup rippled in a wooden bowl, the surface sprinkled with dried herbs. A light salad sat next to it, leaves glistening with dressing, fresh vegetables cut open with their juices all but sparkling in the sunlight. More substantial fare sat off to the side – clumps of wine-stained rice wrapped in leaves, seared fish glazed and topped with mushrooms – but Riker’s eyes went straight to the glass of white wine.

“Ensign?” he prodded.

“From Counselor Troi, sir,” Ensign Wheeler said, and Riker’s face darkened. The ensign hesitated and dug in his pocket, removing something so small that his hand totally concealed it. “And from Captain Picard.”

He set a single nutrient capsule down on the desk. Riker stared at it, his face perfectly blank.

“Thank you, Ensign,” he said in a terrible, toneless voice. “You may go.”

Ensign Wheeler bit his lip. “Sorry, sir. I can’t. I—” He stuttered when Riker made eye contact with him. “--I’m supposed to stay and...”

The last word, ‘watch’, dissolved into a whisper. Riker studied Ensign Wheeler, giving nothing away. He took the glass of white wine and drained it in one long drink. Red-faced, Ensign Wheeler bowed his head.

He tried again. “S-sir—”

Worf winced, sensing what would happen before he even heard the crash of broken glass. Riker hurled the wine glass to the ground in one sharp movement, so quick Ensign Wheeler didn’t see it. Then, face twisting, Riker kicked at the shards, his boot striking off the table leg and scattering PADDs and dinner trays all over the surface. The tray from Counselor Troi shot out over the edge, and even as Ensign Wheeler rushed to catch it, Riker leaned over and gave it the final push it needed to hit the ground. Clumps of rice disappeared, making pockmarks in the snow. The fish sizzled, heated flesh suddenly plunged into the cold.

“*Commander*,” said Worf. He held out one arm – the first position of restraint – but in the end, he didn’t have to do anything. Riker spun on his heel with a muffled curse. He stood there, just for a second, with his back to Worf and Wheeler, with his fingers curled tight in his hair.

Then he walked away – not toward town, not back to the ship. He left them without a backward glance and went into the woods.

That single bite of pelmeni was a bad idea. Riker stopped twice, up to his calves in snow, to swallow back a rush of pointless bile. His body temperature had spiked so high he had to disable his bio-metrics again, and his pulse pounded in his temples, skittering just inside his skull to prick his brain. He swallowed, his throat raw, and pushed off – deeper into the woods, into the trees.

He regretted the outburst already. Regretted it deeply. Worf might respect it – Worf always respected anger issues – but it was an ounce of dignity he would never get back with Wheeler and Ulrich. Wheeler was humiliated. Sensitive type. Picard had no doubt chosen him deliberately – thought Riker would know better than to bite off his head.

But he hadn’t, and there was that rush of bile again. Riker spat into the snow, shoved his hands deep into his pockets. Commanders didn’t throw temper tantrums, and that’s what he had done. Undeniably.

And now—

He palmed sweat off his brow. Irrational images filled his head. An insurgency. Bodies in the street. The brig. Blood on his hands. He thought of the Pegasus – God, how long since he thought of the Pegasus – and locked his jaw tight, forced those memories back down. Cold, phantom hands crawled down his belly to his thighs.

That was when he heard a child crying.

At first he thought it was in his head. He rested a fist against his temple, not quite striking himself – but not gentle, either, hoping the rough contact might jostle something loose. The sniffles got louder. Real. He crunched over the snow, hyper-cognizant of his own red face and bleary eyes, the hollows in his cheeks—

There.

Riker stepped out of the bushes near a frozen creek. There was a boy just meters away, a boy he recognized. Tritate, barefoot, with his knees curled to his chest and his face buried in his arms. Thin shoulders hitched up and down as the boy sobbed to himself, unaware that he was being watched.

Riker backed off. He tracked backward through the snow, careful not to make a sound. Then, when he couldn’t see Kal anymore, he crashed slowly through the underbrush, making as much noise as he could, rustling branches and stomping on the snow. When he emerged at the creek, Kal was sitting up, his tears mostly under control and his ruddy cheeks wiped clean.

“Hey,” said Riker brightly. “You know how to get back to camp?”

Kal stared out at the creek, his chin wobbling. “You lost?” he said, keeping his voice low so it wouldn’t tremble.

“Just a little,” Riker said. He approached Kal slowly, one step at a time – giving the kid plenty of opportunity to draw away if he didn’t want company. Kal held still. He watched Riker’s approach from the corner of his eye, wary but not flinching. “You mind if I sit?” Riker asked.

Kal shrugged. Riker folded himself onto the bank at the boy’s side. Green reeds poked through the snow, stiffer than Terran weeds, more flexible than wood.

“Pretty spot,” Riker commented.

Kal nodded – and sniffed hard. Riker flicked one of the reeds, testing its sturdiness.

“You know how to whittle a flower?” he asked, reaching into his parka.

Kal shook his head, stone-faced. From an inner pocket, Riker removed his switchblade, well-chipped from yesterday’s work on the capsule shelters. He wiped a bit of sawdust off in the snow and cut a reed loose at the root.

“It’s easy,” he said. He pinched the reed between thumb and forefinger, holding it out like it was an arrow stabbing him in the ribs. “Do you have a dominant hand, or can you use both?”

Kal eyed the reed and the knife. "Both," he said, barely audible.

"Good," said Riker, "then you can just copy me." He angled his blade against the reed and scraped down toward his own fingers, shaving a thin curl of green pulp away from the stem. Slowly, with exaggerated care, Riker lifted his blade before the piece clipped off. He twirled the reed clockwise and started anew, creating a second long curl, identical in length and width.

Kal's tight shoulders relaxed. He sat up a little straighter, watching with tired eyes. Around the stem, over and over again, Riker created layers of 'petals', each one curling out and lying atop the last like a rose. When only a tiny sliver of green wood remained in the center of the petals, Riker twisted and pulled as gently as he could, until finally the sliver broke away.

"There," he said, holding the flower out to Kal. Kal leaned closer, studying the delicate wooden structure without touching it. "Go ahead," Riker encouraged.

"I might break it."

"They're easy to make," Riker said. "When I'm done, I just toss it away and make another." He tossed the flower over his shoulder; it disappeared into the snow without a sound.

"Why?" Kal asked.

"Why toss them? Or why keep going?"

Kal stayed silent, his eyes stormy.

"I keep going until I get bored," Riker explained. "And I toss them because they're too much hassle to keep." He plucked another reed from the snow and held it out to Kal. "You try."

Reluctantly, Kal closed his fingers around the reed. He accepted Riker's knife, turning it first one way and then the other to watch sunlight reflect off the blade. He wasn't the type of kid who liked to be watched, Riker decided, especially not when trying something new. So he stared out at the creek instead, pretending to be absorbed by nature, until Kal relaxed enough to give it a try. The quiet scrape of steel on wood filled the air.

"I used to do this when I was a kid," Riker said, his eyes on the frozen creek. "I'd come down to a creek just like this, to be by myself. Fish in the spring and summer. Whittle in winter and fall."

Kal didn't ask why. Riker wouldn't have answered him if he did.

Chapter 5

“Frankly,” said Councilor Pom, “as far as I’m concerned, the issue isn’t Yannites at all. It’s *unwanted Federation civilians* invading our colony, *our* colony that *we* terraformed—”

Picard rubbed his temples. This was the first he’d heard of an issue with Federation civilians, and it felt like Pom was just being contrary at this point. A knock at the door distracted him, and Commander Riker leaned through, his eyebrows raised.

“Yes, Commander,” said Picard, relieved for a distraction. “Report.”

“We’ve finished allocating new housing, sir,” said Riker. “I’ve dismissed Alpha Squadron for the day. Muster tomorrow at zero-seven.”

“I won’t allow my children anywhere near Federation ‘helpers,’” put in Pom, as if Riker hadn’t spoken.

“Your children have been near Federation helpers all day,” said Troi, exasperated. Riker loitered in the doorway, watching the discussion like a racquetball match.

“Starfleet helpers,” Pom snapped. “Officers! Fine. But not the civilians.”

“Gods only know where they come from,” said Medgard.

“*You* know where they came from,” said Picard. “You personally approved every Federation civilian on Denali III!”

Councilor Pom drummed his fist against the table. “I turn a very wary eye, Captain, to anyone who comes leaping to help when a people are at their most vulnerable,” he said.

“That’s highly cynical of you,” Picard said.

“I’d say it’s very wise,” cut in a familiar voice. Picard turned to find Riker still leaning on the door frame. “No offense, Captain.”

Picard spread his hands in defeat. “By all means, Commander, speak your piece.”

“Of course we like to think that only the most empathetic Humans would come rushing to a war zone,” Riker said, “but we’re all experienced enough to know it’s not true. Who flecks to the vulnerable? People in search of a profit, for one. The Federation doesn’t stand to make a profit off this—”

“So far as we know,” said Medgard begrudgingly, and Riker acknowledged him with a nod.

“--so that leaves us with another possibility. People in search of control.” Riker shrugged one shoulder. “It doesn’t hurt to be a little wary.”

Picard would argue that it hurt immensely and tangibly, but he didn’t get the chance. Pom slapped his palm against the table and said, “I couldn’t agree more!”

“But you *require* long-term assistance,” Picard persisted. “And the Enterprise cannot be here forever. Some Federation civilians will be necessary.”

“Given,” Medgard grunted.

“Then let us choose them,” said Pom.

“You *have* chosen them.”

“We have chosen from the slim pickings Starfleet allowed us,” Pom countered. “But with your authority as flagship captain...”

Picard sat back with a sigh. He could sense an irritating amusement coming from both Riker and Troi. “Name your choices,” he said, voice clipped. This whole thing was just a stalling tactic, to avoid making any concessions to the Yannites. But the longer he resisted, the longer this would drag.

Medgard and Pom eyed each other.

“Kyle Riker,” Pom decided.

In the doorway, Riker’s hand slipped off the frame.

“He claimed to have missions elsewhere,” Pom continued, lifting his chin. “We accepted his suggestions at the time for replacement consultants, but we must insist on the man himself.”

Picard digested this. He cast a questioning glance at Riker. He wouldn’t make the decision without Number One’s approval. Riker bore Picard’s stare like a weight on his shoulders, his face long and his eyes weary.

“Fine,” he said finally, voice muted. “Call him.” To Picard, with a shrug, he added, “It certainly can’t hurt.”

“Couldn’t it?” Troi muttered.

Riker rapped his knuckles against the door frame to get Picard’s attention. “*I’ll* call him,” he said.

Picard sighed. Privately, he thought Kyle was more likely to ignore a summons from his son than from the Enterprise's captain. "No need, Number One. I will make the request myself."

"I'll be here," Riker said simply. Before Picard or Troi could stop him, he turned to Councilor Pom and said, "Kyle Riker is my father. If you'd like, I can show him around the camp – act as liaison, catch him up–"

Picard opened his mouth to cut in.

"Wonderful!" Pom exclaimed. "I have heard impressive tales of your father's consultation on Bajor, Commander. I look forward to working with the two of you."

A bit ungraciously, Riker checked his chrono. "Then if it's alright with you, Captain–?" he asked, already edging out of the room.

He left Picard feeling unpleasantly as if he'd been outmaneuvered.

Uncle Ian's sickroom reminded him of Mom.

It wasn't a good place to hide. There was no clutter to get lost in; they kept it clean in case a nurse needed to come through. Sometimes, in a pinch, Will could come here when Uncle Ian was asleep. He'd sit down on the far side of the bed, hoping that the sheets draped down far enough to cover him, and he'd plug into a music PADD, screw his ear buds in, and listen to Dad's favorite records for hours. Until the smell of illness got too strong. Or Uncle Ian woke up. Or the door opened, and if the door opened...

It wasn't a good place to hide.

Today, Will kept himself busy, trying not to watch the clock. If all went well, his dad would be home today. His mission was supposed to end fifteen days ago; delays had kept him up in space, and he'd stopped answering Will's messages last week. But the captain had answered – even if she was annoyed to be contacted by a nine-year-old kid – and she'd said Dad would be in transport range *no later* than today.

He switched out Uncle Ian's IVs all by himself. He helped the medtech change Uncle Ian's sheets and wash his body with the sonic hand-shower, over the clothes. A dull pain settled in his stomach, as low as it could get, scratching at his pelvic floor. Outside, he heard the distant hum of a snow-skimmer and he closed his eyes. Outside, he heard the metal clang of a door slamming shut, and he wrapped his arms around his stomach, held his breath.

The smell reminded him too much of Mom. It made his stomach hurt. Everything in this house made his stomach hurt. He wanted to stay in his own cabin. His own room. Not have to share it with...

The front door opened. Below, in the parlor, a familiar voice called, "Will!"

"Dad!" Will jumped to his feet. He didn't say goodbye to Uncle Ian; he just ran. Down the stairs, past his babysitter, straight into Kyle Riker's unwilling arms. Kyle's hand went to Will's shoulder, trying to hold him off, but it didn't work; Will wrapped his arms tight around his dad's waist and buried his face in his stomach, and he didn't let go.

It had been four months this time.

Gradually, Kyle Riker leaned into the hug. His broad hand ruffled Will's hair.

"Hey, come on now," he said softly. He pushed Will back a step, breaking the hug and putting some space between them. "Where's your babysitter?"

Will shrugged.

"I thought we might have dinner with–" Kyle glanced up the stairs.

"No," said Will quickly, cutting him off.

"Kid–"

Will pushed forward, hiding his face again. Voice muffled and miserable, he said, "I just want to spend time with you."

A pause. A slow stuttering sigh. That hand was back, Kyle's thumb bending the shell of Will's ear.

"Okay, you manipulative little shit," he said, not without affection. "Let's go."

Will didn't wait. He rushed past his dad to the snow-skimmer, where Thelonus Monk was playing low and steady on the speaker. Jazz piano. Mom had played the piano; Dad used to, too, and there was one in Uncle Ian's parlor, tuned and dusted. Will had sat for lessons there on a low bench that made his back hurt, fingers questing for the right keys. He shut the skimmer's door for warmth and switched the music to John Coltrane instead. Outside, on the wet spring grass, Kyle paused to talk with Will's babysitter, and Will tried not to watch.

It made his stomach hurt again. He hummed along to the saxophone and tried not to fidget. Only when his dad came back – when the engine started and the doors were locked – did Will relax.

"Can we go fishing?" he asked.

Kyle's eyebrows went up a notch as he handled the steering wheel. "It's my first day back, Will. Let an old man rest."

"Please?" When Kyle didn't answer right away – just shot him an annoyed look – Will pushed. "You always say fishing *is* resting."

"I don't believe I've ever said that," said Kyle.

"You *would* say it, if you thought of it," Will said. "I just got there first."

Kyle barked out a laugh. But he didn't say yes. He just changed the subject. "Did you have fun while I was gone?"

"Ian and I perfected our tap dance routine," Will said. "But then the night of our big show came and he refused to get out of bed."

He could see Kyle biting the inside of his cheeks, trying not to laugh. "That's not funny, Will," said Kyle, deliberately facing away. Will could still see his smile in the window glass. "I hope you don't make jokes like that around—"

"No." Now Will was the one staring out the window. He watched the Valdez port go by, too hazy to see if there were orcas in the bay. Kyle's fingers flexed on the steering wheel, making the leather creak.

"Uh, Will," he said eventually, "if you really want to go fishing..."

Will didn't dare to glance his dad's way.

"Well, I can grab the tent," said Kyle, darting a look at his son. "We can go to Curtis Creek. Set up camp. Maybe—"

"Okay," said Will, his voice too small. He curled his knees up to his chest and cleared his throat. He knew how important it was to sound right, and the next time he spoke, he nailed it: voice strong, tone bright and chipper. "Can you tell me about your mission now?"

Kyle's shoulders relaxed. "Okay. But come Monday, we're coming back down here and apologizing to your babysitter. Understood?"

There was a hard note to his voice that couldn't be disobeyed. Will steeled himself. "I understand."

"And you're putting the tent up by yourself tonight."

That, Will could do. It was a lot easier than facing Uncle Ian's house again. He turned the mental image over in his head even as he and Kyle reached home and packed their backpacks. Dad handed Will the tent, forcing him to fasten the straps and carry it atop his pack – "Tall enough to handle it now," he grunted. Will didn't argue. His mind was fast-forwarding to Monday, making plans. He could feign illness, but that never worked. Better to be actually ill. Better still to be wounded. Or missing. Running away would just earn him extra punishment, but maybe he could stage a kidnapping. Window broken from the outside; blood on the floor. Easy. He could cut his hand. He could break the window tonight, sneak out of the tent, hike back to the house while Dad was sleeping – Dad would never see it, because he never went around back of the house; Will would just have to suffer the chill until Monday. The blood could come from his own hand. No, better be his shoulder. He would use his whittling knife; he'd hide the wounds beneath his sleeves. He'd build a shelter out of fallen limbs and leaves, fish for his food—oh, he'd need a fishing pole—could he make his own—? And a pan to cook it in – would Dad notice it was missing—?

"Will," said Kyle impatiently.

Will blinked, swaying under the weight of his pack. His dad stood on the front porch, bundled in a down vest and ready to go. He held the screen door open with his foot.

"You got it, or no?" Kyle asked.

"I got it," Will said. He hurried to catch up, shrugging his shoulders until the weight of the tent felt almost natural.

"You can carry your own pole," Kyle said as Will stepped into the sunlight. The pole was waiting for him, leaning against the house where its metal runnels scratched the siding. "Got your sleeping bag?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then let's go." Kyle waved him on. It took a good ten meters for Will to find his balance. Then the pack settled and he could focus on the soft give of grass beneath his feet, the crisp pine air coming down from the mountains, the smell of the sea. He followed behind his dad, letting Kyle's taller, broader body break through any spiderwebs that might be stretched across the trail. That was another problem with running away: spiders. They'd be lurking in his outdoor shelter for sure; no way to keep them out. Will squared his jaw and tried to quell the queasy trembling in his fingers, that urge to run that always took over when he saw anything with more than six legs. He remembered a summer camping trip when he was six, when he woke – itchy all over – to discover fat brown spiders in his hair, crawling on his face, skittering beneath his t-shirt and over his toes.

He'd just have to get over it, like Kyle always said.

They set up camp on the flats near Curtis Creek. Their old campfire was still here, regularly stoked in winter by Will, whenever he sneaked out here. Just to get away. He wedged his pole between two rocks while he popped the capsule tent into place and unrolled their sleeping bags. Kyle saw to the fire, eager to get a pot of coffee on; he said he couldn't sleep without it.

They fished until the stars came out – until the air cooled and Will started to shiver beneath his jacket. His dad told him stories about the galaxy while they ate, and Will never knew which parts were true and which were exaggerated. Hour by hour, the tension of Uncle Ian's house – the memory of the sickroom smell – of his babysitter – faded away.

Kyle kicked ashes over the fire. He poured the dregs of his coffee over it with a pattering sound, dark beads of liquid disappearing into soot. Will broke his fishing pole down and locked it away in the long tin case Dad always made him carry. In the darkness of their tent, they crawled into their sleeping bags, the forest floor hard and cold beneath them.

Ten minutes. Maybe more. Quiet, sneaky, Will scooted his sleeping bag closer to Kyle's side. He only dared to do it one inch at a time. Shift, pause, hold your breath, enjoy a modicum of extra warmth... then shift again. When he thought he was safe, Will put an arm around his father's waist in slow motion and cuddled close.

"Will," said Kyle, his voice thick with sleep.

Will knew that was an order, but he pretended not to hear it. He clutched harder at Kyle's sleeping bag.

"Am I old enough to stay by myself?" he asked. He kept his face buried in Kyle's blanket as he asked, so he could feel Kyle's heat, the slow up-and-down motion of his stomach as he breathed. It was easier to ask the question if he kept his head down.

"Are you old enough to stay by yourself?" asked Kyle in a grumble. His hand quested through the darkness and found Will's hair – and pushed him away. "You're not even old enough to *sleep* by yourself, apparently. Get to your own side of the tent."

Will let go – first to grab Kyle's hand faux-playfully, holding him in place – then quickly surrendering the moment that Kyle got frustrated and jerked his hand away. Will rolled over, the sleeping bag pulled up to his chest.

"We'll see," said Kyle reluctantly.

It was ten minutes later, when he was almost asleep, that Kyle heard the quietest sniff. He cracked one eye open. In the darkness, he could just barely make out Will's silhouette. Betty's long straight nose. Betty's cat-like eyes. Betty's unruly hair. His chest squeezed, and as he watched, tears rolled silently down Will's cheeks. He didn't make a sound. He just lay there, his arms crossed beneath the blanket, hugging himself and staring blankly at the tent ceiling. He didn't sob; his breath came slow and almost even, as quiet as it could possibly be. He let the tears fall without wiping them away.

Even as a toddler, Will hated to be caught crying. Even at his mother's funeral, when anyone would accept his tears, he'd tried to hide it. He wouldn't want Kyle to catch him now; wouldn't want Kyle to ask why.

That's what Kyle told himself as he closed his eyes and turned the other way.

Chapter 6

They were all gathered outside the town hall, where Kyle Riker was set to beam down. Picard stood with his hands clasped behind his back and his head held high. He was doing his best not to let his irritation show – and it was more difficult than usual. Not just because dealing with Kyle Riker left a bad taste in his mouth, but because concern for his first officer was *already* roiling in his gut. Councilor Pom had no way of knowing how badly he'd scuppered Picard's plans.

"Just one," Troi whispered on Picard's other side. He glanced over and spotted Riker palming a nutrient capsule – surreptitiously, so none of the Tritates could see what he was eating, he slotted it into his mouth. With no water, the bitter taste left him stifling a cough.

Troi hooked her arm through Riker's. She rubbed his biceps in a silent thanks and caught Picard's eye.

A knot swelled in his throat. This was ridiculous. He should put a stop to it right now and order Riker straight to sickbay. But before he could reason through this instinct, decide if it was right or wrong, a molecular sheen of glitter arrested the air in front of them.

Kyle Riker was here.

He got his bearings first, before his expression changed. His hooded eyes dashed over Picard and Will as if they weren't here; he didn't seem to notice Troi. Studying the Tritate councilors, his gaze lit upon Ruth Galvan–

–and came to life.

"Ruth!" Kyle exclaimed, marching forward. He held his arms open for a hug, and Picard and Troi both shifted their feet. Ruth folded herself into Kyle's arms with a laugh, a kiss on the cheek, an easy familiarity that went back for years.

"You two know each other?" asked Picard, voice flat.

"Well, of course!" said Kyle. He released Ruth, but she didn't go far. "I'm the one who convinced her to move to Valdez."

"Much good it did me," said Ruth wryly. Kyle slung an arm around her shoulders.

"Ruth and I were consultants together on Bajor," he explained. "She used to help me out a lot when Will was young."

As if noticing his son for the first time, he gave Will a nod. Picard snapped his head around to study Number One. Face blank, hands behind his back, Will had the look of a bored teenager standing idly in the supermarket while his parents chatted with an old friend. He met Picard's eyes by happenstance, but there was no hint on his face that he understood just how strange this was – his own behavior, and the fact that up until now, he had never bothered to mention that he knew Ruth Galvan from when he was a child. Uneasy, Picard stepped back and faded into the shadows, where he could think.

"You were stationed on Ulmanon II?" Kyle was asking Ruth. "No kidding!"

"Yes, yes–" She cut herself off with a laugh. "Says the man who single-handedly guided the research project on Tertia!"

"Oh, you..." Kyle shook his head affectionately. Eerie how many of Will's mannerisms could be spotted in his father. Not just the way he moved, but the easy, flirtatious way of speaking, the gregariousness that allowed him to make friends with strangers. As he introduced himself to the Tritates, Picard could sense them warming up to Kyle quicker than they ever did to him.

Negotiations would be much simpler with Kyle at his side. But Picard glanced at Will Riker, professional and polite and atypically reserved, and thought he would have liked to do it the hard way, without Kyle Riker here.

That night, negotiations went on longer than usual. It was past dark, with most of the Enterprise's crew in bed, and the lights were still on in the town hall. From outside, Riker could see the shadowy silhouettes of his father and Picard pacing around each other, smoothing things over with the Tritates.

The Tritates, who didn't trust Federation civilians. And Kyle, who was trying to convince them to set those concerns aside.

Riker huffed out a sigh, visible in the cold air. He turned away from town, toward the woods. The woods had always been his solace. Mom had hated them, Dad said. He'd told Will that when he was six or seven, when he first joined the Scouts. *Your mom hated the woods – anything that might get her shoes muddy, she avoided like the plague.* It had been like a stab to the heart to hear that, and it still hurt now, irrational though it may be. Deanna didn't care for the woods either, and it had never mattered much.

Snow banks stretched out before Riker, tinged blue by the moonlight, and black wherever shadows touched it. Cold air seeped through the protective layer of Riker's pockets and kissed his scraped knuckles, making the raw, exposed wounds there ache. He liked hot climates – Risa, Betazed – but there was something to be said for the cold. It touched the bags beneath his eyes and pushed them down a little, made him feel just that much more awake, alive. You felt everything with extra clarity in the snow. You remembered everything with just a touch more detail.

Curtis Creek. Uncle Ian's sickroom. The snow-skimmer that took Mom's body away.

Here it was, the frozen river where he whittled a flower for that child. Kal. Riker stood on the slick bank, his toes cracking the thin scrim of ice at the water's edge. He crossed his arms tight over his stomach, just below the ribs. Enough pressure there, and his heartbeat would slow down. He'd learned that as a kid. Maybe if he pressed hard enough, the nausea swirling in his stomach would go away too, but he doubted it. Internally, everything was heavy, tight. Threatening to fold.

He didn't want to puke again. He sank to the ground, cold snow beneath him, twinkling stars above. Knees to chest, he could free his hands up, get the knife out of his parka and examine the blade. He'd replicated a chunk of walrus ivory earlier today. It wasn't like a real tusk; there were no scars along the sides from fighting, no scrapes from busting open clamshells. Riker remembered hiking along the ocean view when he was little, all alone – wind clawing at his hair and cutting through his jacket – ice thin beneath his feet. And he'd seen two tusks poking out of a hole in the ice ahead of him, where a walrus was resting, body floating in the water down below.

He laid his blade against the ivory. It was just a small piece, easy to hold in the palm of his hand. Sometimes he liked to pencil out his projects first, really think about them, spend time on the design. But there were plenty of little figures he could whittle out by memory, without thinking too hard. He waited for one of those faces to present itself. An old fisherman. A shaman. A tree spirit. Anything.

But nothing came to mind. Riker's hand moved automatically, blade pressing down into soft ivory, taking out a violent chunk of bone. His fingers wouldn't work; he couldn't force them to. He tried again, looking for finesse, and watched a wobbly curl of ivory chip off from the rest.

Again. Furious, quick, ruthless, he jammed the knife blade into the ivory, hard enough to break the blade. Miracle that he didn't. Again. Harder. Bigger chunks, ugly gashes, no rhyme or reason to it. Riker's eyes burned. He stabbed into the ivory so hard the tip of his blade poked through the other end of the tusk. Again. Uneven, senseless chunks of bone, angry tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. He sniffed, face hard.

This time the knife slipped. This time it sliced his fingers open, right across the knuckles, and with a muffled growl, Riker threw the piece of ivory away. Blood slicked his palm as he opened his hand and studied the wound in the moonlight.

There was a vulnerable stretch of muscle there: below the ridge of his fingers, above the gentle curve of his thumb. The spot where his lifelines formed a triangle, upside-down.

Riker raised his knife and drove the blade straight into his palm.

They were signing the treaty when Troi bit her tongue to stifle a gasp.

A near-strangled "*Mm!*" of pain made it past her lips, enough to get Picard's attention. He glanced sideways at her, must have seen the tension in her shoulders, but he didn't ask. Packed between Kyle Riker and the Tritate-Yannite coalition, he didn't have the freedom to check on her, had more important fish to fry.

But a phantom pain dug into the meat of Deanna's palm. She squeezed her hand into a fist, the bite of her fingernails turning the phantom pain into a real one. Tangible and grounding. Somewhere distant was a roar of emotion: shame above all else, thunderously loud.

She slipped out of the town hall without making any excuses. Dazed, half-blind, she hurried down the empty streets in search of that emotion. It clung to her fingers, tugged her forward: golden light, *Will's* light, beckoning her toward the woods. His shame seeped into the pleating of her brain, found all the little things she hated thinking about: the soul-deep guilt of being only an empath, Mother's title weighing on her shoulders, her father's mind for maths and engineering eluding her, Mother's talent for telepathy always out of grasp–

Will, said Deanna, her panic spiking, *stop*.

A jolt of misery broke through the shame. An apology without words. A question.

Yes, I'm coming, Deanna said, and the shame only swelled. She broke into a run, batting fir branches out of her way as she crashed through the forest. Snow slipped beneath her boots and threatened to suck her down, but she pushed on. Brambles snagged at her coat; thorns scraped along her unprotected hands. She'd left her gloves behind with Picard, barely noticed the cold.

There.

The underbrush gave way into a clearing. Will stood there, head bowed, moonlight glinting off the blade of a knife he held in his right hand. His left hand lay open, fingers spread, something dark and wet coating his palm.

"Will," Deanna breathed, coming up short. He kept his head down like he didn't hear her. Mustering her self-control, Deanna marched forward, shrugging out of her parka as she went. She could feel the bone-deep numbness in Will, part of it from the cold, part of it from lack of eating, and part of it...

She wrapped her parka around his shoulders. She bundled him close to her, as close as his unwilling body would bend. She tapped her combadge.

"*Enterprise*," she said, voice shaking, "lock onto my coordinates. Two to transport straight to sickbay."

She managed to get the knife out of Will's hand just as the transport beam locked them in place.

Chapter 7

They were seen to in the privacy of sickbay, with Beverly herself as Will's doctor. There was no option. It was rare for a med tech to treat a ranking officer anyway, but for something like this – self-inflicted, hands trembling, Counselor Troi holding him upright – there was no one who could see him like this except the Chief Medical Officer.

“Whittling accident?” asked Beverly wryly.

Her bedside manner gave nothing away: just humor, because that was what Riker would respond to. His guard softened a little and he let Beverly see his hand. Only Troi could sense the tension underneath Beverly's smile.

“That's a lot of wounds for a slip of the knife,” Beverly remarked. She traced Riker's shaky left hand with her regenerator, knitting the pockmarks and gashes together again. “You mind if I take a scan?”

“Go for it,” said Riker, his voice thin. He held still until the regenerator was done. Scars healed, Beverly turned to grab her medscanner. In one smooth movement, she gathered up a medical wipe and scrubbed the blood away from Riker's palm at the same time, while her scanner was recalibrating. The thin, gauzy piece of cloth dipped between Riker's fingers and over the curve of his thumb, to the crust of drying blood that had dripped down his wrist. Deanna squeezed Will's shoulder and felt the give-and-take of emotions that resulted: comfort, slow and warm, and then a flare of impersonal revulsion that made her pull away.

Beverly didn't have the advantage of empathy. She kept cleaning Will's hand, unaware of the building anger in his system, the overwhelming distress at her touch. Deanna monitored it closely, ready to step in, but before she could, Beverly glanced up and saw the feverish glint in Will's eyes. She paused, then dropped the sanitation wipe in the nearest bin.

Will's distress faded. His shoulders slumped.

“One moment, Will,” said Beverly gently, and she swept the medscanner over his pale form. “You've lost a lot of blood, you know. If Deanna hadn't found you in time, you could have died.”

Will closed his healed hand into a fist. In silence, Beverly studied the scan results. She unloaded three hyposprays into Will's neck, each one making him wince more than the last, a bruise forming just over his pulse point. Then she handed him a nutrient capsule, not unlike the one he'd eaten yesterday, and he forced it down.

“I'll remand him to your custody, Counselor,” said Beverly to Deanna. To Will: “If she thinks you're fit for active duty, then you'll be released. But if Deanna wants to ground you, I'm not going to write you a favorable report, Will. It's up to her.”

Will stood with a grimace. Deanna supported him, her hand on his waist, a little alarmed to feel his body beneath his clothes, to see firsthand how much weight he'd lost since landing on Denali II. She exchanged a look with Beverly before she led Will out of sickbay.

“Planetside?” he asked in a grunt.

Deanna processed that. Did he really think she would take him back to Denali II? Neutrally, she said, “I think we'd better spend tonight here, Will.”

“I thought you'd say that,” he muttered. No anger, just exhaustion.

“Your quarters or mine?” Deanna asked.

The idea of an unfamiliar bedroom filled him with dread. He didn't answer, but Deanna steered him toward his own room without hesitation. She didn't like the gulf that opened up inside him when he thought about her quarters, her bed, her sheets. She puzzled over it a little on their short walk down the hall; he'd been inside her bedroom plenty of times, had even stayed the night, and never had she sensed this type of fear. It tingled in his fingertips and numbed his legs.

Inside his quarters, mixed emotions tugged at him from all sides: relief to be here, on the Enterprise, behind locked doors; a swell of terror when he glanced at his bed. Will's face was guarded, his expressions locked up, but when he met Deanna's eyes, she had no doubt he could sense what she knew. He shifted his gaze away, unable to maintain eye contact.

“I'll take the couch,” he muttered at the floor.

“Will,” said Deanna, her heart aching, “I think you've earned the bed. Beverly would kill me if I gave you a back ache on top of everything else.”

He flexed his injured hand, his eyes dark. Not ready to sleep. He chanced another quick look at the bed and tore his eyes away, pulse jumping, a visible throbbing in his throat.

“Let's get you something to eat,” Deanna suggested. She brushed her hand over his gently, just to test his reaction – and to her relief, there was no flare of distress, not like the attack he'd experienced when Beverly cleaned his hand. She crossed to the replicator, keying through his favorite foods. “What sounds good?”

“Nothing,” said Will almost inaudibly.

A lump formed in Deanna's throat. She found a light soup, easy to digest, and watched the replicator hum. Behind her, Will came back to himself just enough to shuffle to the nearest chair and sink into it, his knees up, his feet propped on the table's edge. He was playing with his

beard when Deanna set the soup down in front of him, twisting curls of hair between his thumb and forefinger hard enough to hurt.

"It's Ruth, isn't it?" Deanna said. "Ruth Galvan."

Will's fingers slowed to a halt. He sat up in increments and grabbed his spoon, just letting the cup of it drift through the broth. Shame sank into his skin, into his inner organs, and stung the most sensitive, untouchable parts of his body.

"She was my babysitter," he said without emotion.

"You never told me," said Deanna.

He shrugged. He stuck the spoon in his mouth, but all he tasted was metal; Deanna could taste it too, through their bond.

"They met on Bajor," Will said. "Must have been before I was born. When her husband got sick, Dad suggested they move to Valdez." He forced himself to take another bite. "She watched me any time Dad went away for Starfleet – not for long. I'd say age seven to age ten."

"What happened at age ten?" asked Deanna, afraid to ask.

Will stared down into his soup. "Nothing," he said, his eyebrows furrowing. "I convinced Dad that I was old enough to stay alone. That's all."

"Will..."

But words failed her. Will's jaw hardened; he glanced away, staring stubbornly at the dark corners of the room. With a sigh, Deanna leaned forward. She placed her palm flat against Will's cheek, so she could feel his warmth, the soft scrape of his beard against her skin.

Will, she said, I know what she did to you.

He closed his eyes. Slowly, he caught Deanna's hand and kissed her palm, a hint of affection that didn't fool Deanna one bit – when he released her, he was careful to leave her hand on the table, not on his face. It was just a gentle way to break the touch. Stirring his soup, Will said,

"She wasn't a great babysitter."

Deanna sat back, her eyes stinging. "That's one way to put it," she muttered. Head down, Will gave a twisted smile.

"If you know what she did, then I don't have to say it, do I?"

He said it lightly, with a sparkle in his eye. But his voice wobbled halfway through.

"No, Will," said Deanna softly. "Not if you don't want to."

His smile dropped. He rested his chin on his hand, letting his fingers curl so that Deanna couldn't see his mouth. Idly, he stabbed at the soup with the blunt edge of his spoon, no longer pretending to eat. Deanna could feel every slow, stuttering breath, every sizzle of pain cresting on the inhale, and the frantic ciphering of his brain as he scrambled his thoughts, tried to focus on anything other than Ruth. On Kyle. He turned his head a little, swiping at dry eyes.

"Is it obvious?" he asked, keeping his gaze averted.

"Is what obvious?" Deanna asked.

Will gestured at himself. At the air. His eyes darted over the table and Deanna's hands, but never reached her face.

"That I..."

His thoughts cycled through broken sentences. Ruth. Dark bedrooms. Unwanted touch. Intimacy issues that everyone joked about in Ten-Forward; an addiction to sex that he tried to turn into a joke. Whiskey for breakfast; bruises on his face; a refusal to eat; a temper tantrum in the housing line; blood running down his arm from a ruined left hand. An invisible brand on his forehead, marking him for life.

"...that something's wrong with me," he finished. He inhaled, shuddering, almost laughing. "I think Beverly gave me a sedative. I'm sure of it. I wouldn't be acting like this if..."

Deanna reached across the table. She squeezed his injured hand. He almost met her eyes, then; just for a second, before he looked away.

"Let's get you to bed," she said.

Will sat cross-legged beneath Uncle Ian's bed, his heart hammering in his chest. His PADD lay in his lap, the news strip still running, but he couldn't hear it over the sound of his own pulse. The images of Axar Station throbbed across his brain. Whole one moment, containing hundreds of people, including Kyle Riker. And gone the next.

That was where his dad was stationed. He knew it. He always memorized Dad's orders before he left. He'd snuck into Kyle's bedroom while he was sleeping and activated his PADD, and he'd skimmed the paperwork there in the dark. Axar Station. They still didn't know how many people had been evacuated – if any – before the reactor exploded. Did they even know the danger was coming?

If Dad died–

Will bit down on his thumbnail. Hard. Down to the quick. Blood welled up in his broken cuticles, hot and ferric against his lips. He bit his

knuckle next, teeth scraping against the skin. What were kids his age supposed to do when they felt bad? Hug a teddy bear. He huffed out a humorless laugh. Suck their thumbs if they were really little. He wiped the blood from his hands with a sigh. Cry? His eyes were dry; he wasn't sad, exactly.

He just couldn't stop his heart from hammering.

Will curled his knees up to his chest and started the news strip over again, from the beginning. He watched Axar Station explode without blinking, scrutinizing every second: there had to be a way out, an escape pod he had missed, a beam – could you see beams on camera? Maybe there had been a transport, and he just couldn't tell. He hadn't studied hard enough, he didn't know what to look for, he'd never been permitted to use the transport pad–

A shadow fell over him.

“Will?” said Ruth.

Will stared at her shadow, his eyes hooded. The floorboards creaked as she crouched down to reach beneath the bed frame. Long, manicured fingers closed around Will's PADD and drew it from his lap; knuckles brushed against his inner thigh.

“Come out of there,” Ruth said.

Will placed his palms flat on the floor and scooted out into the light. Ruth didn't even glance at him; her pale eyes were fixed on the PADD now, watching the news strip. A line appeared between her eyebrows.

“This is your dad's station,” she said.

Will couldn't tell if she was upset or not. He got to his feet and his head came up to Ruth's belly, and without even seeming to think about it, she pressed a palm to the back of his head and pulled him closer, driving his face against her stomach in a terrible hug. He inhaled the scent of her unfamiliar laundry soap, the clean, un-lived-in fragrance of her skin, like every inch of her had been deodorized and disinfected.

“What did you do?” Ruth asked.

Her voice dripped with disappointment. Will closed his eyes, and the gentle hand on the back of his head tightened, fingernails scratching at his scalp. He twitched, but he didn't try to get away.

“Will,” said Ruth firmly, “were you being bad?”

Like when Mom died. Like when Uncle Ian got sick, really sick. Will couldn't answer. His throat was tied up in one massive knot. Ruth grabbed a handful of his hair and tugged lightly to get his attention.

“Tell me what you did,” she said.

Will swallowed hard. “Nothing,” he managed.

Another tug, sharper this time. His scalp burned.

“And now you're lying, too,” Ruth said with a shake of her head. Will tensed, his eyes squeezed shut, waiting for the other shoe to drop. But it didn't. Instead, with a sigh, Ruth combed his hair back into place. She wormed her sharp-clawed hands beneath his arms and scooped him up, forcing him closer – arms around her neck, legs around her waist, thighs tensing, stomach quivering in a flinch. She smoothed a palm up his lower back, a long slow rub.

“You can sleep with me tonight,” she said.

Will met Uncle Ian's bleary, drugged eyes as Ruth carried him away. She flicked the lights down as they left. Her bedroom, down the hall, was one Will knew too well. He didn't like the mattress; it was too plush and he always sank too deeply in it; the blankets, homemade, scratched his face, knit flower appliques and beaded petals catching in his hair. Ruth set him down there with the lights still off. Her nails worked the buttons on Will's shirt. She pushed against his shoulder, laid him down, coaxed him to lift his hips so she could slide his jeans down to his ankles and tug his sneakers off his feet.

“Underwear on or off?” she asked, her fingers teasing at his waistband.

“On,” said Will in a small voice.

“Roll over, then.”

She flicked the blankets until he squirmed underneath them, leaving plenty of room for Ruth to climb in. Will crowded himself to the very edge of the mattress. He stared at the wall, waiting for the shadows to ease a little and the wallpaper pattern to reassert itself, and he pretended not to hear the rustle of clothing as Ruth got undressed. She always wore pajamas. She never got naked.

The mattress dipped. Will clung to the raised edging so he wouldn't roll against Ruth's side – but she came to him anyway. Her arms encircled him. She moved him effortlessly, snug against her stomach, so he could feel her breathing at his back. He used her arm as a pillow, her skin soft and clean. Long fingernails trailed over his bare stomach, tracing patterns that made him shiver. Ruth's breath warmed the back of his neck and ruffled his hair.

“Are you going to be good?” she asked in a murmur.

Will flinched away from her nails, but it just drove him back against her body, into her arms.

“If you’re good,” said Ruth, “maybe your dad will be alright.”

He thought of Axar Station and his throat closed up.

“It’s worth a try, isn’t it?” Ruth asked reasonably.

Will closed his eyes. “Yes. But…”

“But what?” Ruth asked, her hand questing lower.

Will’s voice trembled. “But I don’t like this.”

There was a long silence, and nothing but the gentle scrape of Ruth’s nails to distract him from Kyle Riker’s possible death.

“What’s not to like?” Ruth asked finally, closing her palm over his underwear in a soft squeeze. “I’m just holding you. So you can sleep.” She sighed and kissed his neck. “Poor Will. This is what a mother does. You didn’t know…?”

He stayed silent.

“Don’t you want a mother?”

Deanna woke with phantom fingers lingering between her legs. She sat up, someone else’s terror lurching in her throat. Will’s quarters weren’t entirely dark; he’d left a light on near his bed, softly glowing, like a child’s nightlight, and even now she could see his sleeping face – at peace – at total odds with what she knew he was dreaming.

She touched her face and found a crust of dried tears rimming her eyes. Across the room, with a slow, exhausted sigh, Will woke. There was no dramatic cry of pain; he didn’t even open his eyes. He just shifted, his forearm covering his face, his breath leaving him in a long exhalation.

“Are you awake?” Deanna asked, although she knew the answer. Her voice was low and trembling. Will rolled to the side of the bed, making room for her, and that was all the invitation Deanna needed. She hurried over and crawled in next to him, and she was at once Deanna Troi getting in bed to comfort her imzadi, and at the same time she was eight-year-old Will Riker shuddering and cold, and in one awful moment she was Ruth Galvan, and at the last second, Deanna flinched away from touching Will at all.

“Don’t do that,” he said, his voice heavy with sleep. His hand reached out to her beneath the blankets, fingers curled. *You saw?* he asked, switching to nonverbal communication.

I saw, Deanna confirmed. She took his hand. He shifted onto his side, his back to her, their fingers locked. And Deanna gave in to instinct. She wrapped her arms around his waist and held him close, until their breathing synced and she could feel his tension fading away.

Is this okay? Deanna asked.

In response, he brushed his thumb over her knuckles. A silent yes. Deanna closed her eyes. The nightmare would never fade; she’d remember it for the rest of her life. But Will’s lack of food and sleep was bleeding through their bond, through every inch of skin-to-skin contact, and she couldn’t stay awake. Eyes closed, she tried to banish the memory of Ruth, to lose herself in Will’s slow breathing, his warm body, the solid weight of him against her. With Betazoid precision, she found the nexus of distress inside herself and let it go. She emanated peace – calmness – relaxation – a sense that everything would be okay, that he could trust her, he could sleep.

Broad hands clenched tighter on her own. Will’s breathing hitched. He kept his eyes closed, pretending to be asleep, and Deanna let him. She couldn’t hear him crying; she pretended not to feel it, either, through their empathic bond – even though her throat tightened and her chest squeezed and her eyes burned along with his.

No one, she sensed, had ever held him quite like this before.

Just to sleep.

Chapter 8

“Can I watch?”

Geordi turned, his VISOR calibrating. The heat signature was Tritate: young, barefoot, probably no more than eight years old. No harm in it, he decided. He stepped back from the broken heating unit and gestured for the kid to take a look.

“My name’s Geordi,” he said as the boy knelt in the snow.

“Kal.” Little fingers inspected the heating unit’s internal works. Useful, Geordi decided, to have someone that small to help you out. He handed Kal a screwdriver.

“You know what you’re doing?” he asked.

“No.”

“I’ll show you, then.”

They repaired the unit one little piece at a time. It wasn’t really damaged; just old, with what appeared to be a bird’s nest caught up in its gears. Kal removed dry pieces of straw one by one while Geordi ran a diagnostic. The kid was focused, a little line between his eyebrows where his family crest was tattooed, and he listened to Geordi’s instructions with the kind of laser concentration that indicated a young engineer.

“You got a family?” Geordi asked, nodding to the kid’s crest. “Parents?”

Kal’s eyes flickered. “No,” he muttered.

“Siblings?”

Kal ignored him.

“Here,” Geordi said, smacking the cover panel into place. “Screw that in for me. I’ll go find another unit for us to work on.”

“Okay.” Kal struggled with the panel, clumsily working the screwdriver while he held it up with his knee. Good kid, Geordi decided. He cycled through the mechanical debris that had been delivered to him for a civilian workshop in repair, searching for something simple – something challenging for a boy Kal’s age, but do-able. He had just seized on a broken clothing template when a mighty crash made him jump out of his skin.

He turned. Distant, over the roofs of nearby houses – there. A plume of smoke. Another crash. A mushroom cloud of dirt and snow. Kal dropped to his knees, screwdriver still in hand, neck craned. Waiting for the next bomb.

“Shit,” Geordi muttered, and he slapped his combadge. “LaForge to–”

Another crash. The ground dipped beneath Geordi’s feet and slammed back up into his soles, nearly knocking him over. He wobbled forward. With every explosion, the broken units bounced and fell, and Geordi had to kick his way through them to get to the kid. To Kal. Careful, he shielded the boy with his body and tapped his combadge again.

“LaForge to Security–”

Gentle hands wrapped around his shoulders. Geordi jumped. The next explosion stole all sound; he saw the old woman’s lips move, but couldn’t hear her. Then his eardrums popped and the thin unreal sound of her voice threaded in.

“--can take him,” she was saying, and she shifted her grip from Geordi to Kal. He slid sideways, giving her full access to the kid. “--keep him--”

Geordi’s knees shifted a few degrees south as another explosion hit.

“--shelter--” Ruth was saying.

“Yes! Go!” Geordi roared. He gestured wildly, urging both of them away. His combadge vibrated against his chest; someone was speaking to him, but he couldn’t hear who. He grabbed handfuls of dirt, pushed himself to his knees, to his feet, stayed standing as a building to the south of him evaporated, a spray of dust and splintered wood. Now, through the empty lot, the haze of smoke, he could see the Yannite militia peeling through the streets. Geordi ducked behind the nearest shack and calibrated his VISOR, searching for signatures he recognized, people he knew.

There. Worf first, a phaser flaring brilliant-white. Riker next, cutting sideways, arm raised as he shouted orders. Geordi jogged to meet them, ran right into a civilian – stranger – Human? – Kyle Riker, who grabbed him by the elbows and steered him to the nearest alleyway.

“Who is it?” Commander Riker shouted, too busy stunning militiamen to glance away.

“It’s LaForge!” Kyle shouted back, and he shoved Geordi aside. Geordi didn’t have time to feel offended. That was when he noticed Councilor Medgard and Captain Picard, face bloodied and eyes grim, and he understood: there was no time to catch him up when they had an insurrection to put down – and a captain to protect. He veered through the throng of security men, past Beverly Crusher tending to the wounded, past Deanna Troi shepherding the civilians to safety, and ducked behind Commander Riker’s tall frame.

“Sir—” he shouted, formulating a plan.

“The power network!” Riker shouted back, understanding. And approving. “Go!”

Geordi had to crawl. By now, most of the insurgents were flat on their backs, and it was Tritate fire he had to worry about. He avoided locals at all costs. Near the Grand Dukha, tucked away into an alley, was the master PADD that controlled the shields, the power network, everything. The council said Yannites were susceptible to flashing lights. Now was the time to test that theory out, see if it was real or simple prejudice.

He coded in a pattern. He keyed it to go. He waited. If there were flashes, he couldn't see them. Protected by his VISOR, Geordi watched the streetlights, counted down a minute and a half, and turned the PADD off.

When he stood, all around him, Tritates and Yannites alike lay clutching their heads.

Geordi took off. The ground seemed stable underneath him for the first time since the explosions started. He weaved through groaning bodies until he found the Enterprise crew again, their positions significantly changed – Picard waving Beverly off, sniping at her to see to the truly wounded first; Beverly sniping back that if she didn't seal his eardrum, he'd go permanently deaf; Riker kneeling by a downed Tritate, taking his pulse; Kyle Riker nudging an adolescent with his shoe to see if she was still alive. Troi helped a woozy Councilor Medgard to his feet.

“They won't be down much longer,” said Worf in a growl as he handcuffed the insurgents.

Riker slapped a maglock on what looked to be the leader – and on a couple of downed Tritates too, for good measure. “Some insurgency,” he said. “Beverly, were there any casualties?”

Beverly was busy sticking something translucent and sticky-looking into Picard's ear. “Not among the locals,” she said grimly. “It appears they were mostly targeting us.”

“Not each other,” Picard murmured.

Worf rolled a militiaman over and snatched the cloth mask from his face to see his clan marking. Yannite. But the one next to him, once the mask was removed, was Tritate through and through; Geordi recognized the crest. He joined Worf, removing the masks one by one, until they had a mixed group of Yannites and Tritates lying prone between them, slowly coming to.

“It appears they've found a uniting cause,” said Picard dryly. “But why call us here only to drive us away?”

Kyle grunted. “Teens,” he said, exposing one fighter's baby-cheeked face. “Manual laborers.” He held up a limp hand, exposing its calluses and scars. “These aren't exactly Denali's finest.”

The kid he was manhandling woke up with a gasp and jerked his hand away. Eyes squeezed closed, he rolled over just enough to hide his face in the snow, and let Kyle cuff him.

“He's Tritate,” Worf said. He cast an accusing look at Councilor Medgard. “Correct me if I'm wrong, Councilor. I believe you said flashing lights affect only Yannites.”

With a dignified sniff, Medgard brushed the dust from his robes. “Anyone would be affected by strobing lights that strong,” he claimed.

“Oh, for—” Troi muttered. Captain Picard held a warning hand out in front of her; if the locals didn't want to acknowledge that they had the same DNA, then it wasn't worth convincing them. On the other side of Councilor Medgard, Commander Riker crouched down in the snow and examined the boy Kyle had been prodding.

“What's your name?” Commander Riker asked.

The boy muttered something into the dirt. Riker brushed his hair back, exposing the clan marking on his forehead, just between his brows.

Geordi recognized it. He caught his breath – and Commander Riker met his eyes.

“Have you seen a boy named Kal?” Riker asked.

His pupils were pinpricks. His heart rate spiked, creating a flare of color in Geordi's VISOR.

“I saw him,” said Geordi uneasily. “He was helping me with the repair shop. You don't think he has anything to do with this...?”

The adolescent on the ground, Kal's brother, shook Riker's hand off his shoulder with a growl.

“He's been staying in a Federation orphanage,” said Riker, his eyes flashing, “and this militia just attacked Federation men. Where's Kal at now?”

“There's nothing wrong with the Federation orphanages,” said Councilor Medgard sourly. “These malcontents are just determined to keep the war going until we're all destitute—”

Riker interrupted him, eyes like ice, boring into Geordi's soul. “*Kal*,” he said firmly.

Geordi stared helplessly at the boy in the snow. “He's safe. Ruth took him—”

Across from him, Riker had lost all color, and in the distance, where she was speaking to a shaken civilian, Troi went still.

“Commander...?” Geordi started.

There was nothing he could say.

They found the child.

It was Worf who broke the door down. It was Kyle who encountered Ruth – caught her in the hallway, wide-eyed, playing innocent. It was Will who shouldered through the bedroom door and froze there, his tall frame blocking Kal from view. Troi followed slowly. Her small hand found its way to Riker's back, between his shoulder blades.

No one was unclothed. Kal sat, obedient and clean, at Ruth's desk, with a Federation PADD propped up in front of him. He studied his times tables with strained eyes; he barely glanced Commander Riker's way: too still, too careful.

And Troi could feel the shame and fear rolling off him, the same way she could feel it piercing Will.

No other children came forward, but one was enough. In a closed chamber on the Enterprise, Kal gave his testimony. Outside, Will Riker leaned against the wall, his arms crossed tight. He was still too thin, with dark smudges underneath his eyes, and he stared at the floor unseeingly. His father paced before him, more agitated than Will had been since Ruth was taken into custody.

"They've got to let me testify," Kyle said.

Worf, guarding the locked room where Ruth was being held, said nothing.

"She's an upstanding Starfleet strategist," Kyle said. "By God, she's got a record longer than I do."

"I know, Dad," said Will dully, his eyes far away.

"She's safe with kids, for God's sake." He stopped, his face red around the jowls, and whirled on Will. "You're going to testify on her behalf," he said, like an order.

Will shifted his gaze up from the floor and squinted at his father.

"Aren't you?" Kyle asked.

Worf watched. Neither Riker seemed tense, but Worf could sense the possibility of a fight. He drew himself up, stood on the balls of his feet, ready to go. Just in case. But Will just folded over his crossed arms with a sigh.

"Aren't you?" Kyle demanded.

"No, Dad," said Will, his voice clipped. "I'm not going to testify on her behalf."

Kyle stared at his son in disbelief – and something like disgust. "She *babysat* you," he said. "That woman took you into her home while her own husband was dying, and you won't lift a finger to help her in her time of need!"

Will's face was closed off. He stared at the floor, pretending not to hear. There was no color to his face; nothing but a drained weariness.

"She watched you—" Kyle started. His voice faltered. He took a step closer, eyes darting over Will's face. When he next spoke, it was with a gentle touch to Will's arm and a quiet tremor in his voice. "She babysat you," he said again, almost inaudible, "all the time..."

There was work to be done planetside. Possibly, there would be work for decades. In the Federation orphanage, Yannite caretakers and Human bureaucrats picked through the security system, switching access codes over to only those who had been newly screened and approved. Outside, capsule shelters popped up in the vacant lots where buildings had once stood, and Beverly Crusher was hard at work overseeing equipment transfers to the hospital.

Ruth Galvan was gone. She had left two nights ago, in maglocks, on a Federation security shuttle. Captain Picard declined to tell Will where her trial would take place; with his testimony already recorded, there was no need for him to attend.

Nor for Kal.

Nor for Kyle.

"It's not a very friendly outpost, is it?" said Kyle gruffly. He and Will stood near the Grand Dukha, where a final round of negotiations were being hashed out. Tritates and Yannites, united against a Human enemy, had suddenly found peace.

"It doesn't have much reason to be friendly to us," Will said. He kept his arms crossed over his stomach; to Kyle, he looked young, almost teenage. It was the lack of food; it was the way he kept hugging himself to stave off the cold.

And it was the way he kept avoiding Kyle's eyes.

"Will—" said Kyle, shuffling his feet.

"You're heading out soon?" Will asked him. It was the same cold, professional tone he'd used the last time they met, when Will was offered command of the Aries.

"Yes," said Kyle. "There's nothing I can do here." He studied Will, his face suddenly tight. "Is there?"

It ripped a wound in his chest just to ask. Eyes hooded, Will stared down the road at the orphanage, watching the children – Kal included – strike up a game of chase. Kyle glanced their way, but he couldn't stand to look at Kal for very long. He'd watched the testimony footage. He knew what the boy had said, the strict set of rules Ruth had set out for him: how to be good; what would happen when he was bad.

Ruth, who wormed her way into his good graces because they both had to deal with a sick and dying spouse; Ruth, who was pretty, charming, intelligent, who loved camping and hiking, just like he did, who thrilled to the idea of living in Alaska. Ruth, who wrote up Kyle's first favorable report as a consultant, who got him stationed on Ulna III, where his career really took off.

This was the woman who'd taken care of Will while Kyle was away.

He closed his eyes. He heard again the crunch of snow beneath his boots that year, when Will was ten, when he asked to stay alone. The tests Kyle put that boy through. He remembered standing in the winter cold, his hands tucked beneath his arms for warmth, watching Will scramble into the house's crawlspace to tape up the frozen pipes – Test #1. And he remembered melting in the heat of the kitchen, coughing on the smell of burnt eggs, while a nervous Will proved that he could cook his own food – that he could drive the snow-skimmer in an emergency – that he could get the generator online and batten the house down for a storm – that he could even build a shelter in the woods and gut a fish and filter water, if need be.

It hadn't made Kyle proud. It had pissed him off.

He remembered his temper rising; he could feel the phantom of it still, a stirring in his lungs, his stomach, that made him want to shout. *If you're so grown-up–*

He'd torn Will's bedroom open. He'd gathered up the starship models and the children's books, the biographies Will loved on baseball stars and fighter pilots and explorers. He'd filled his arms with building sets and electric kits. He'd taken Will's old, unused stuffed animals – the ones that Betty bought for him; the ones he never touched – and he'd hauled them all outside, to the burn pile, where last year's brush clearing lay piled up beneath a layer of snow.

He remembered the scent of gasoline. The stinging heat of flames too close to his face. The wind blowing sparks into Will's eyes and blowing his hair back as he watched, emotionless. Not crying. Not even sad. Just distant and cool.

Kyle blinked the memory away. Will stood next to him, leaning on the wall, that same distant expression on his face.

“Did you know?” Will asked suddenly.

Kyle's eyes burned. He clenched his hands into useless fists. Staring at the ground was the only way he could speak.

“I had no idea,” he said. “Will... if I'd known...”

“If you'd known...” Will interrupted haltingly. “Would you have...?”

The end of that sentence dangled in front of Kyle's eyes. *Would you have stopped her? Would you have believed me? Would you have quit Starfleet, or would you have just found someone new to watch me? Would you have come home?*

And all Kyle could say was, “I don't know.”

Will nodded. He didn't move as Kyle's face crumpled – not into tears, exactly, but into something pained and raw, begging Will to look at him, without words. He didn't move as Kyle edged closer, rough hands on Will's shoulders, coaxing him to turn, to face his father. Stiff, unyielding, he allowed Kyle to pull him into a hug, but his arms stayed crossed.

He let his father hold him. He kept his eyes closed. The cold wind of Denali II ruffled their hair and pressed them closer together, into an embrace that should have been warm and comforting. But to Kyle, it was like hugging a stone: one that he had taken from the forest, scrubbed the dirt off of its surface, worked into a shape he liked a little better. One that he had carved, almost without realizing it, one clumsy chip of a knife blade at a time.

“I love you,” Kyle whispered, barely capable of saying it. Will shifted in his grasp, but didn't break away.

“Goodbye, Dad,” he said.

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