

To Touch the Future

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To Touch the Future

by [jamaharon](#)

Summary

A new teacher comes to Valdez Elementary, covered in scars.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

It wasn't a snowball – it was solid ice, packed tight, and when it hit Marnell's brow ridges, his entire world exploded into light. He pitched forward: snow rubbed his bare hands raw, filling his mouth, shouts of triumph coming from behind him somewhere. All he could see was white, throbbing pain.

"Got him!" Jeff Walborn yelled.

"You did *not*, Jeff, that was *my* ball!"

"I'll get the next one, then," said Jeff, suddenly much closer. Marnell tensed, scabbled, tried to roll over, but it was too late. Human fingers twisted in his collar and jerked him out of the snow, and he was face to face with the fastest kid in school. Jeff's eyes darted down Marnell's face, over his gray skin, and with a curl of the lip, he dragged Marnell toward the jungle gym.

"No—" Marnell started.

"*This* is a Cardassian torture technique," Jeff said, and the kids around them all 'ooh'ed. "My dad told me all about it."

He shoved Marnell to his knees, eye-level with one of the wooden rungs that made up the jungle gym structure. Marnell bucked, his neck muscles straining to resist as Jeff pushed his face closer and closer to the rung.

"Bite it," Jeff ordered.

Marnell kept his lips firmly closed.

"Bite it!" Jeff said. His snow boot thudded against Marnell's lower back, where a Human's kidneys would be. The other kids took up the chant, shouting over each other, and Marnell didn't know what would happen if he opened his mouth – what Jeff would do – but he clamped his jaw tight, and when Jeff's fingers bruised his jaw trying to wrench his mouth open, he let out a shaky moan of dread. "Open your mouth!" Jeff said. "Gail, grab him by the—"

"I don't know this game," said a pleasant, adult voice.

Marnell didn't have time to process the fact that he was being let go. Jeff's fingers disappeared so fast that Marnell pitched forward, slamming his forehead against the jungle gym's bars. He curled in on himself, rubbing at the sore spot above his eyes, and peeked sideways.

"We were playing Starfleet," said Jeff flatly.

A tall man – a stranger – studied Jeff. He had his hands tucked in his pockets, and he wore an old battered coat, the leather worn shiny in some places, ancient Valdez patches on the lapels. But if he'd been here long enough to wear that coat down, the boys should have recognized him, and Marnell could tell from surreptitiously studying their faces that they didn't.

"Starfleet, huh?" the man said. He glanced down at Marnell, and for half a second, as he took in the facial ridges and scales, his expression flattened – became something guarded. Not an expression at all. Then his pale blue eyes crinkled up into a cat-like smile. "Maybe you can teach me sometime – after class." Suddenly his pleasant voice had the iron under-tone of a teacher. "Go," he ordered, and Jeff and his friends

scattered.

The playground emptied. Snow whispered under Marnell's feet as he shifted position, not quite ready to stand. The stranger approached him, picking his way through abandoned jump ropes and gravballs hidden in the ice and gravel lot. A cold wind ruffled his gray hair, clipped extra short. He held out a hand.

"What's your name?" he asked.

Marnell eyed the hand he'd been offered. There was something dreadfully wrong with it, even for a Human. Only the first two fingers remained, like hooks. The rest had been subsumed into a lump of hairless shiny tissue, almost as silver as Marnell's scales. He didn't want to touch that hand. Long, scarred fingers. Waxy skin. Thick calluses. But the stranger held it out steadily, patiently, and Marnell had no choice but to take it. The stranger smiled and helped him to his feet.

"Marnell," Marnell forced himself to say. "My name's Marnell."

"You go to school here, Marnell, or at the camp?" the stranger asked.

"Here," Marnell said. He swallowed, craning his neck to stare up at the tall stranger. "The school at the camp doesn't teach right."

"No?"

Marnell didn't bother to answer. It was too much effort to explain the books – written for Cardassia's stupidest children, not for kids like Marnell – and the teachers, refugees who'd rather watch the news and hide in the supply closet to cry. The stranger studied him, and Marnell studied him back. The stranger's gaunt cheeks and hollow eyes made the scales on the back of Marnell's neck shudder with a cold flush. Thin scars raked up the side of the man's face, into his hairline, and Marnell didn't know enough about scars to guess what might have caused them.

"There's no reasoning with kids, is there?" the stranger mused.

"Eh?" said Marnell.

"Adult bullies, I know how to handle," the stranger said. "Once I was caught in a cage. No translator. The alien studying me, she thought I was some kind of an animal, and she kept testing me by offering me fruit. I'd slice it up, distribute it to the rest of my team. Then I'd hand a piece to her. Share it. Always threw her off-guard." His pale eyes flicked away. "Kids know all the same cruel tricks adults know, but you can't stop them the same way. You just have to survive it."

Marnell's heart was in his throat. Survive. He knew something about that. He'd survived the trip here, to Sector 001, to Earth. He'd survived the war. He eyed the stranger and his scars and suspected he'd survived a lot, too.

"I'm in fifth grade," he managed in a whisper. He couldn't explain why he said it, but it made the stranger smile.

"I'll be seeing a lot of you, then," he said, tucking his hands back in his pockets. He opened his mouth to say something else, but the schoolhouse door slammed open, and Mrs. Merculief leaned out into the playground.

"Mister Riker," she said sharply, "if you're done with Marnell, I've got a spelling test to hand out."

The stranger grinned down at Marnell. He swayed his shoulders, a way to gesture Marnell toward the schoolhouse without exposing his hands to the cold.

"Get to it, Marnell," said Mr. Riker. "I'll see you in history class."

Their new teacher was a sourdough, meaning he'd been born and raised here, unlike Marnell and his mom. Elissa Edwards said so.

"My grandma knew his dad," she claimed at lunch. "He was born here. He even went to school at Valdez Elementary. The old building."

"Then how come we've never seen him before?" Norman Breeder asked.

"Cuz he's Starfleet," Elissa said.

Marnell scratched at the ruined lining of his cardboard milk container and cast a quick, nervous look around the lunch table. Jeff was stabbing his mashed potatoes with a sour look on his face.

"Do you know him?" asked Norman, turning to Jeff.

"No," said Jeff, with a dark tone. "Should I?"

Norman balked at the nasty look on Jeff's face and turned away. Undeterred, Elissa leaned toward Jeff and said,

"Isn't your dad in Starfleet?"

"He doesn't know *everybody*," said Jeff, like Elissa's question was the stupidest he'd ever heard.

"Maybe your dad's not really in Starfleet," said Norman, who was *always* claiming Jeff's dad wasn't in Starfleet.

"Maybe Mr. *Riker's* not really in Starfleet," Jeff shot back. "He doesn't look like a Starfleet guy to me." He went back to stabbing his potatoes, truly vicious now, and muttered, "He *looks* like a basket case."

One by one, the students sneaked glances at Mr. Riker. He was eating at the far end of their table, out of earshot, chaperoning his class the same way all the Valdez teachers did. Rumor had it that an epic food fight decades ago had changed the rules forever, and now all teachers had to camp out at their students' table in case something went wrong. The other teachers liked to use the replicator at lunch. Mrs. Mercurief ate comfort food, Russian dumplings and warm soups. Mr. Summers, the track coach, always loaded up on massive sandwiches and bags of chips. But Mr. Riker sat back in his chair, legs crossed, hooded eyes fixed on a PADD, and all he ate was a bitter-looking nutrient pill. Marnell watched the scar on Mr. Riker's left cheek flex and stretch as he chewed the capsule down to dust.

"Jeff's dad really is in Starfleet," he said to his classmates, turning back to his food.

The other kids whipped their heads around to stare at him. Across the table, Jeff froze, his fork lancing through a cooked carrot, his face stammering into a confused glare.

"He helped set up the refugee camp," Marnell said. "I met him."

Norman gave him a strange look, almost disgusted, and went back to his plate. Elissa seemed not to hear. Slowly, Marnell returned to his own food, picking at the milk carton without effect.

Jeff kicked him beneath the table and mouthed, "I don't need your help."

Marnell shrugged. His clumsy fingers ripped a piece of soggy cardboard from the milk carton while the other kids resumed their whispering about Mr. Riker – and at the end of the table, Mr. Riker stood. A thrilled silence fell over the students as Mr. Riker disappeared into the kitchens – teachers never went into the kitchens! – and came back, his eyes far away. He bypassed his seat entirely, like he didn't see it, like he'd forgotten where he sat.

He stopped at Marnell's side. He held a carton of milk in his hands, fresh from the freezer. He cupped it in his bad hand, the one with the missing fingers, and with his left, he deftly folded the carton open and set it down next to Marnell's tray. He smiled at Marnell's classmates as if he hadn't heard them whispering about him.

"Recess in ten," he said.

"There's a Starfleet officer at school now," Marnell said one night while his mom was loading the sonic. She shoved an armful of dirty sheets into the unit and kicked it close with a huff, scales flushed a warmer shade of gray, while Marnell sat in the bin of dry, warm clothes, basking in the near-luxurious heat.

"A Starfleet officer?" Mom said, a little breathlessly. Marnell clasped the plastic edge of the laundry bin and rocked gently back and forth in it. "What for? To guard you?"

"What do we need guards for?" asked Marnell, his heart rate kicking up a notch. The bin slammed back down to the floor, all rocking ceased.

"Nothing. What's he there for, then?"

Marnell scrutinized his mother's face. He remembered the last weeks on Cardassia, when everything went to hell. The phaser-fire whizzing past his classmates as they ran to school; the ear-piercing whistles that drove everyone to the ground and made their internal organs quiver. If you were close enough to one of those whistles, it could tear you apart from the inside out. He'd seen it happen. He'd been close enough to watch.

Not here.

Never here.

Marnell forced himself to look out the window, where the lights of Valdez were twinkling softly and a protective net shielded the sky from pollution, so he could still see the stars. Here, if they put guards in the elementary school, it would just be to make sure the kids didn't get into fights.

"He's our history teacher," Marnell said.

"Oh," said Mom. "So he's retired, then."

"I guess. He's pretty old."

Mom jabbed her thumb against the sonic's 'on' button over and over again, patiently searching for the right angle. It wouldn't turn on unless you hit it just right.

"What's his name?" she asked.

"Mr. Riker."

"Do you like him?"

Marnell thought it over. The scars. The savage haircut, like someone had hacked it all off with a knife. The missing fingers.

"I think he's sick," he said, curling his knees up tighter and rocking the bin again.

Mom twisted her thumb against the button until something inside gave way. The sonic laundry hummed to life. "Sick how?" she asked.

“You know. Like Grandpa was sick. Back home.”

Mom froze. She glanced at Marnell, her brow furrowed. In the room with them, sitting on the low shelf where Mom liked to fold their laundry, there was – just for a second – a ghost. A Cardassian man, larger than life, the type of warrior who you could tell used to be bulky and imposing, but something quick and piercing had cut him down, whittled him to wasted muscle and jutting bone. Marnell could smell bile in the air, a phantom scent left over from that day before they fled Cardassia, when he found Grandpa dead in his bedroom, his service rapier still clutched in his rigid hand. Still bloody.

“If he’s sick,” said Mom finally, slowly, “then this is a good place for him to be. Yes? Just like it’s a good place for us.”

Marnell tucked his chin against his knees and looked away.

It was close to winter break, and none of the kids in class were behaving. Marnell couldn’t blame them. He kept fidgeting too, and if he had any friends to talk to, he’d be turning in his seat to whisper to them. That’s what he used to do back home. But here, the other kids were all either Human or Bajoran, and neither species wanted to trade secrets with him.

“Hey,” said Mr. Riker mildly. He didn’t have to raise his voice to be heard over the chatter. “You guys are acting like you don’t *want* to learn about 22nd Century politics.”

Gail groaned. Norman threw a stylus. It bounced harmlessly off the display board over Mr. Riker’s shoulder.

“You know, Norm, on some planets that would be considered an act of war,” Mr. Riker warned.

Elissa pounced, leaning forward in her seat. “Can you tell us about Starfleet, Mr. Riker?”

He gestured at her with his teaching PADD. “What do you think I’ve been doing for the last half hour? Reciting baseball stats?”

“What’s baseball?”

Mr. Riker put a hand to his forehead and pretended to swoon, earning a few giggles – and a spike of alarm from Marnell, who didn’t realize it was a joke at first. He settled back into his seat, nerves shot, and hoped the other kids hadn’t noticed how he almost leapt out of his chair to help.

“Did you go to any weird planets?” asked Norman.

“The weirdest,” said Mr. Riker, eyes back on his PADD. “There was one planet full of children who actually got A’s on their history exams.” He affected a shudder.

“No, tell us something real,” Elissa whined. “You never tell us anything *real*.”

“I should’ve known that one was too unrealistic,” said Mr. Riker. He dragged his right hand over his PADD screen, the two scarred fingers refusing to bend quite right. “I’ll make a deal. You guys can ask *one* question–”

“Each?” Elissa asked.

“--and then we’re getting back to the fall of the United States,” Riker said.

“The what???”

“*One* question,” Mr. Riker said. With effort, he held up one of his two fingers. His left hand remained securely locked around the PADD. Marnell rested his cheek on his fist as his classmates put their heads together, whispering frantically. They started out in an urgent conference, strategizing, but the strategy fell to pieces when one or two eager students decided their question was undeniably the best.

“Do you have your own ship?” someone asked. “What’s it called?”

“How’d you get hurt?”

“Have you ever met an Orion?”

“Have you ever *kissed* an Orion?”

“Have you ever killed somebody?”

“Is there a *Mrs.* Riker?”

Riker’s eyes brightened. He pointed his PADD straight at Gail, who had asked about a Mrs. Riker, and cheerfully said, “No, there is not. That’s your one question, class.”

Shouts of outrage filled the air.

“That wasn’t even about Starfleet!” Norman wailed.

“A hypothetical Mrs. Riker would have been in Starfleet too, so it counts,” said Mr. Riker. He tapped his PADD and a strangely-partitioned map of North America appeared on the projection screen. “Now, who wants to guess where the Alaskan border used to end?”

There was one market in Valdez – a year-round, heated warehouse where the local fishermen and gardeners could sell fresh food, the kind you couldn't get from a replicator. Marnell trailed his mom through the booths, keeping an eye out for the round, red fruits he liked the best – not sweet, exactly, but kind of savory, filled with red pulp and pink-stained seeds.

“Marnell,” said Mom, checking her list, “can you run by Hal Rainer's station and ask if he's got any deals?”

“Aw, Mom–”

She nudged him forward, slipping a handful of credits into his palm. Marnell scowled. It wasn't that he disliked Hal. He just hated asking shopkeepers for favors. When he was little, back on Cardassia, it was different. It was easier to act cute and dumb then, and wheedle the salesmen into tossing you a freebie. Now, approaching twelve, he couldn't figure out how to turn the charm back on; it was like, somewhere in the long journey from Cardassia to Earth, he'd forgotten how.

He wove through the booths. Dragging his feet, mind elsewhere, he didn't expect to see anyone he recognized, and when he did, he froze. Up ahead, a familiar, tall, narrow figure was picking through the red fruits Marnell liked the best. He watched, unobserved, as Mr. Riker looped a shopping basket into the crook of his elbow, freeing up his good hand to examine the fruits.

“How much?” he asked the shopkeep.

Marnell listened for an answer, but there wasn't one. Curiosity aroused, he tiptoed closer, careful not to let Mr. Riker see him. He hated seeing teachers outside of school, never knew what to say. Behind the booth, a weathered local sat silent, arms crossed, and Mr. Riker's face grew tight.

“C'mon, Dave,” he said, his voice snappish now, in a way Marnell had never heard it before.

“I won't take a single credit from you,” said the shopkeep, no-nonsense. “You want something, it's yours.”

Mr. Riker's jaw tightened, making the scars stand out. A red blush crawled up his cheeks as he dug in his pockets, but he didn't seem embarrassed. He seemed angry. He slapped a handful of credits down on the counter.

“Will–” said the shopkeep softly.

“Just take the damn money, Dave. God's sake. I'm not...”

Shaking his head, the shopkeep left the credits where they were – but he couldn't force Mr. Riker to pocket them again. Mr. Riker, flustered now, grabbed a handful of red fruits at random and scooped them into his basket. The basket slipped, its balance off, and jerked forward, plastic handle scraping at Mr. Riker's scarred right hand. Marnell knew the basket was going to tip – could see it happening in slow-motion – but wasn't fast enough to stop it. With a clatter, the basket caught against the booth corner and dumped its contents on the market floor.

Mr. Riker stooped to gather them up, his face truly colorful now. Marnell darted forward to help him. Pale eyes flicked up, took him in, darted back down.

“Hey,” said Mr. Riker, his anger gone now. “Marnell.”

He said the name softly, like he wasn't certain. Like he'd almost forgotten it. On Cardassia, Marnell would have been offended. Here, where everyone knew about the single Cardassian boy in Valdez Elementary, it made him falter. He grabbed one of the red fruits out from under the shopkeep's table and wiped the dust away.

“You shop here?” Mr. Riker asked.

“Yeah,” said Marnell. He reached past Mr. Riker to grab another fruit off the floor.

“Your mom likes to cook?” Mr. Riker asked.

Most adults wouldn't have said ‘your mom’. They would have hedged on something more neutral. ‘Your parents.’ ‘Your guardian.’ That meant Mr. Riker must have asked the other teachers about him – must know he only had one parent here – must know about his dad. Marnell hesitated, his fingers centimeters away from the last fallen fruit.

“She doesn't, really,” he said. “We just can't use the replicator for everything.”

He transferred the last fruit into Mr. Riker's waiting palm.

“Why not?” Mr. Riker asked.

“It's not programmed right,” Marnell said simply. “Some of the foods make us sick.”

Mr. Riker's eyes sharpened. He stood slowly, creakily, leaning heavily on the table. His hand came down right on top of the stack of credits he left behind. “Federation replicators,” he muttered. “I bet it's that phospholipid. We had the same trouble on...” Catching himself, he cleared his throat and offered Marnell an unconvincing smile. “Thanks,” he said, gesturing to the basket.

“It's no problem.” Marnell shuffled his feet. “Those ones are my favorite.”

“Tomatoes?” asked Mr. Riker.

Marnell nodded, and Mr. Riker casually swept another handful of red fruits into his basket – for Marnell. The shopkeep didn't protest, so Marnell and Mr. Riker walked away, and Marnell's heart thumped excitedly in his chest. When they were out of Dave's sight, Mr. Riker

hefted the extra tomatoes out of his basket and handed them straight to Marnell.

“I have some experience with replicators,” Mr. Riker said. “I might be able to fix it for you, if you bring it to school.”

“Really?” asked Marnell.

“Yeah. It’s just a little programming. If you don’t put the right templates in, then the machine can’t give you what you need.” They were getting close to Hal’s booth now, and Marnell hurried forward, eager to get this over with and return to Mr. Riker. For once, Hal didn’t seem to notice him, though. He stared over Marnell’s head, eyebrows raised, and lifted a hand in greeting.

“Well, I’ll be damned, kid,” said Hal to Mr. Riker. “When did you get back? How’s your dad?”

Marnell hovered at the edge of the booth. He studied the fresh fish Hal always sold, rows and rows of silver scales just like his own, and dead, tinfoil eyes. While Mr. Riker and Hal talked, Marnell slipped his finger into the rubbery lips of a dead fish, part of him expecting to feel teeth, or a huff of warm breath.

Always check to make sure they’re not breathing, his mother used to tell him. She only started saying that when a kid Marnell’s age was left in the street for days, slowly dying. Everyone who passed him saw the blood, the liquified, ruined eyes, and assumed he was already dead.

Over Marnell’s head, Mr. Riker’s voice was stiff.

“I wouldn’t know,” he was saying. “We don’t talk much.”

“Isn’t he here with you?”

“He was.” Mr. Riker’s gaze darted down to the fish, his eyes hooded. “He’s…”

Marnell rubbed his thumb over a dead fish’s gills, holding his breath. There was a tension in the air he didn’t understand, and at Mr. Riker’s sides, his hands – the scarred one and the whole one – were both clenched into ever-shifting fists, his thumb running over his knuckles, his fingers twisting.

“Busy,” Hal suggested kindly. Mr. Riker sucked in a breath and let it out as a sigh.

“He’s got his career,” he said, voice neutral.

“But he did go to see you, didn’t he, in the–?”

“Hal, I think the kid wants to buy some fish.” Mr. Riker nudged Marnell with his elbow, a kind, tight smile on his face. Marnell met Hal’s gaze with wide eyes and Mom’s credits clenched tight in his hand. Hal didn’t look at Marnell the same way he looked at Mr. Riker. The same way he looked at Human and Bajoran kids. It took him half a second too long to work his face into a smile.

But he did smile, and his shoulders relaxed a little, and he said, “What can I do for you, Marnell?” in the same familiar tone he’d used to ask Mr. Riker about his dad.

Winter break was over. The students came back chubbier, with new clothes and hairstyles. Norman showed off his new PADD, with the Starfleet logo etched along the sides. Elissa brought a backpack stuffed with solstice gifts in the hopes that homeroom might include a show-and-tell. Marnell tried not to look at any of the new items for too long, afraid that someone would ask him how he spent his holidays. On the far side of the room, wearing duct-taped shoes, Jeff rested his chin on his hand and did the same thing.

“Did you have a good solstice, Mrs. Mercurief?” Elissa chirped in Homeroom.

“I certainly did,” said Mrs. Mercurief, and she showed off her new sweater, with a moose knit on the front and a fashionable asymmetrical cut.

In Language Arts, their teacher’s eyebags had disappeared. In Math, the usually-dour Mrs. Coffee had a refreshed spring in her step and even told a joke or two. In Gym, Coach Summers excitedly laid out the ground rules for a new game, one the Bajoran immigrants already knew and couldn’t wait to try.

And in History, Mr. Riker leaned heavily against his desk while he lectured, his skin pale and his frame a little thinner than before.

“Did you have a good break?” he asked the class, his voice rusty – but smiling.

Excited shouts drowned out Marnell’s quiet, “Yes.”

“Good,” said Mr. Riker. His eyes scanned over the children’s faces, lingering for just a moment on Marnell. He hesitated and turned back to his PADD. “We’re just going to have a short discussion today because I’m not feeling very well, and then–”

“What’s wrong?” asked Elissa, sitting forward in her seat.

“Too much eggnog,” Mr. Riker said. The kids eyed his thin frame doubtfully, but before they could ask any more questions, Mr. Riker said, “And then we’re going to play a game. Does that sound alright?”

Cheers erupted. Mr. Riker seemed not to hear them. Warily, he scanned his PADD and waited for quiet. His blunt fingernails scratched audibly against the PADD screen as he pulled up his notes.

“This semester covers recent history,” he said. “The Federation-Cardassian Wars.”

Was that why he stared at Marnell for so long? Gut sinking, Marnell slouched down in his chair.

“Can anyone tell me what year the wars started?” Mr. Riker asked. “Officially?”

Silence. The cheers from earlier had been cut short; the post-holiday effervescence had burst. At the back of the room, one of the Bajoran kids was glaring daggers at Marnell.

“2347,” Mr. Riker said. His bad hand trembled, and he folded his PADD against his chest casually, so the kids wouldn’t notice – but Marnell did. With a smile, Mr. Riker said, “2347. I would have been about your age.”

“You remember when it started?” asked Jeff, sitting up straighter.

“Sure,” said Mr. Riker. “It’s what made me really want to join up. Back then we just called it the border skirmishes. We didn’t think…” That statement curled into Marnell’s stomach and ate at the lining, until he thought that if he moved even the slightest bit, he might vomit. Mr. Riker rubbed the bridge of his nose and checked his PADD. “Okay. The inciting incident was…?”

“The invasion of Bajor,” said one of the Bajoran kids, his voice like ice.

Mr. Riker eyed the kid, his face blank. “The invasion of Bajor was certainly a significant event in the wars,” he said mildly. “But I wouldn’t call it the inciting incident—”

“Tell us about the Dominion War,” Jeff said suddenly, his eyes hard.

Mr. Riker faltered. He glanced at Jeff, his eyebrows furrowed.

“That’s coming up next, isn’t it?” said Jeff. “My dad says you ought to know.”

Mr. Riker blinked. The class was hushed, all eyes darting between Jeff and Mr. Riker. Marnell held his breath to quash the nausea in his gut.

“Ask your dad, then,” Mr. Riker said finally. “We’ll cover it in class – later. But if you’re curious, you can ask your dad.”

Jeff subsided with a scowl. Mr. Riker checked his PADD, a little unsteady now. “Can anyone tell me when the peace treaty was signed?” he asked.

“2370,” said Marnell softly.

“That’s correct,” said Mr. Riker, “and I expect you all to know that one the next time I ask, okay? You’re old enough to remember. Did anyone here watch the treaty being signed, between the Cardassian delegation and President…?”

A few hands went up, then down. The kids looked at each other, eyebrows furrowed, unsure what they were being asked. Marnell couldn’t tell if Mr. Riker was asking who had watched the broadcast or testing them on the president’s name. The longer the silence dragged on, the stranger Mr. Riker’s expression became. Finally, a pink flush spread across the bridge of his nose and he scratched at his earlobe, huffing out a laugh.

“Uh, President…” he muttered to himself.

“Jaresh-Inyo,” said Elissa, her voice drawn out with confusion.

“Right.” Mr. Riker cleared his throat. He caught the children looking at him and let his smile slide wider. “Forgive me, guys. Uh, I actually signed up to be the music teacher, not history, but—” He mimed playing a violin with his bad hand, and a ripple of laughter went through the room, chasing the awkwardness away. Only Marnell failed to laugh. He watched Mr. Riker with new eyes as the lecture went on – and when it ended, and they all turned to their PADDs for a history game, Marnell sneaked glances at Mr. Riker from the corner of his eye.

His history teacher, he realized, didn’t know the most recent president’s name.

“Marnell, can I see you after class?”

Marnell was already halfway out of his seat when he heard the request. He slid his PADDs back into place and settled down, watching with a coil of dread as the other kids filed out. Jeff tossed him a mocking look over his shoulder before he left, and then it was just Marnell and Mr. Riker, and he knew what Mr. Riker was going to say:

I just wanted to check that you’re okay.

I know it can be tough, going over this stuff in class.

The other kids don’t bother you, do they?

Marnell steeled himself. He’d done it a thousand times, but he still struggled to get through this conversation without giving anything away: either pain or irritation. Sometimes he couldn’t keep his head down. Sometimes his voice trembled: even worse when teachers talked to him and the Bajoran kids together, like Coach Summers had. Sometimes he caught himself glaring at the teacher, wishing he could rip the PADD out of their hands and throw it to the ground.

But Mr. Riker slumped behind his desk, exhausted, and said, “You seem bored.”

Marnell blinked. The rising anger inside him turned cold. He hadn’t thought he was in *trouble*.

“No trouble,” said Mr. Riker, reading his mind and dismissing it with a wave of his two-fingered hand. “You fidget a lot, don’t you? Do you get in trouble with Mrs. Mercurielief?”

Marnell’s mouth fell open. “She told you?”

Mr. Riker let out a strangely breathless chuckle. “No, she didn’t tell me. I just remember how much she used to yell at *me* for never sitting still.” He sat back in his chair, trying to find a comfortable angle. “Marnell, when we’re going over this stuff in class – not just my class – is it interesting at all? Or does it just feel like review?”

Marnell’s scales drew tight. He stared at Mr. Riker, alarmed.

“Review,” he said slowly.

“I thought so.” Mr. Riker spun his PADD idly on the desktop. “Listen. I looked over your test scores. From before I got hired.” He hesitated. “It’s . . . not every kid in Valdez who can hit those scores, Marnell. When you were on Cardassia, what kind of school did you go to? A private academy?”

Marnell’s heart beat fast. “A science academy,” he said, his voice small.

“Advanced?”

Marnell nodded. It felt almost dangerous to say so. If the other kids were here to hear it, they’d have pummeled him. But Mr. Riker just chewed it over, his eyes far away.

“Do you *like* science?”

“Yes,” said Marnell, his fingers clenching on the edge of his desk. “I like science and I like sports, and space, and flying—” He stopped himself from babbling. “Not politics,” he said firmly, and Mr. Riker barked out a laugh.

“Really?” he said. “Me neither.” With an amused hum, he lit up his PADD and typed something in. “You know, Marnell, I don’t know if this is up your alley, but the way you’re testing, you could probably get into Starfleet.” He cast a quick glance up at Marnell, whose heart had frozen in his chest. “If that’s what you want.”

If that’s what he wanted! Marnell’s teeth were locked together, his tongue like lead. Part of his soul had leapt straight up through his rib cage, through his skull, and now he felt like it had gotten stuck there, halfway through his skin. The enemy. If someone had asked him this just a year ago, on Cardassia Prime, they would have been arrested. Killed. Mr. Riker was asking if he wanted to join the *enemy*. The organization his father hated.

The organization that saved Marnell and his mom when Cardassia fell. The organization Marnell had secretly associated with adventure, with freedom, for more than a year.

He swallowed past a dry throat and made a decision, quick, impulsive, fervent. “I’d like that,” he said, his voice wooden.

Mr. Riker’s eyes crinkled. He didn’t smile with his lips – just his eyes – and he tapped something new into his PADD. With just his eyes, the smile looked strangely unhappy. Strained.

“You’re sure?”

Marnell nodded.

“There’s this old plan in the school’s database,” Mr. Riker said. “A training regimen from a few decades back. It’s the one I went through when I was your age, to make sure I made it to the Academy. We can update it for the new entrance exam if you like.” He searched Marnell’s face. “It would mean high-level math and science classes. Private tutoring. Martial arts. Flight lessons. Even if you decide not to go into Starfleet, it’s a good program. And we can’t get the resources for it unless we sign you up as a candidate, like I was. If you ever change your mind, Marnell, just stick with the program – reap the rewards – and fail the Academy exam on purpose.”

Marnell’s head spun. He didn’t understand. Mr. Riker searched his face, almost said something else, subsided.

“Do you think you can do it?” he asked instead.

Marnell could hardly hear past the thundering of his own heartbeat in his ears. He took a shallow breath.

“Will it get me out of history class?” he asked.

Mr. Riker just laughed.

It was the first month of spring, and just a few weeks into Marnell’s new study program, when his mom woke him up in the middle of the night. He bolted awake at her touch, heart hammering, certain they had to flee. But Mom just laid a palm across his forehead and said, “Shhh.”

She sat on the edge of his bed, a news strip playing on her PADD.

“What—?” Marnell started, but Mom shushed him again. She pulled her legs onto the mattress, curling up with her back against Marnell’s headboard, and after a second, he leaned against her and watched the news in silence.

Cardassia Prime. The native language, untranslated, was a cool, soothing balm. An unwanted one. For the first time in over a year, Marnell didn't have to strain his mind to understand what was being said. An unfamiliar Cardassian pundit spoke to the camera in a clipped northern accent.

"It's an unprecedented event in living history," he said, "but it's true! A non-Cardassian is running for office on Cardassia Prime." He raised his brows. "And not just *any* non-Cardassian," he said.

The screen glitched. The thin face of a Bajoran appeared onscreen. Marnell didn't recognize them. They were old – maybe his mom's age – with a pale face, no makeup, and lumpy scars on their ear where their Bajoran earring had been ripped right out of the lobe. They were rail-thin, like they hadn't eaten right in years.

"Onu Yumelo," the newscaster said, "a survivor of Lazon II, has announced her bid against Gul Dor Rikk in the upcoming *free* elections."

He said 'free' with a wink in his voice. Marnell rested his head against Mom's shoulder with a sigh. "Who's Gul Dor Rikk?" he asked wearily. What he really meant was: *Why did you wake me up to watch this?*

"He ran the prison camp at Lazon II," Mom said, voice absent. "It's a grudge match."

"But she's not going to win, is she?"

Mom snorted out a humorless laugh and kept watching. Boring stats and graphs filled the screen, mapping out the Bajoran's chances. Marnell didn't understand any of it, but his gaze kept going back to Yumelo's drawn face, her flat, cold eyes. Her scars.

"Starfleet backs Yumelo," said the newscaster, "but rumor has it Dor Rikk is not without a few high-ranking Federation allies of his own." His eyes twinkled. "Time will tell who comes out on top."

The news strip played on, but Mom's eyes were far away. Marnell shifted, finding a comfortable position, soothed by his mother's warmth, the softness of her shoulder, the familiar pattern of her breathing. He could fall asleep like this. But behind closed eyelids, his brain betrayed him. It kept trying to imagine the prison camp. Yumelo. If they hadn't said she was a woman, he wouldn't have known. She had that hungry, lean, androgynous look that people on Cardassia had in old photos, from the famine.

"Who do you think supports Dor Rikk?" Marnell asked, his eyes closed.

Mom hummed. "Nothing's confirmed," she said. "But you might have met him."

Marnell processed that. His eyes snapped open. He bolted upright. His thoughts sprang to – no – not Dad, couldn't be Dad, because Dad wasn't part of Starfleet, so it didn't matter. He searched wildly for any other answer.

"He lives here sometimes," Mom explained. "He's some kind of Federation bigshot."

"Starfleet?"

Mom shook her head. "A consultant. Kyle Riker." She checked her PADD for messages and blackened the screen, glancing at Marnell and his numb, wooden face. "You going to be alright?" she asked.

Mr. Riker's first name wasn't Kyle, Marnell reminded himself as his heart pounded in his chest. The man at the market had called him 'Will.' He slid down in bed, beneath the covers, and stared blankly at the ceiling. He didn't know if it was a triumph or not, to have a Valdez Federation man backing a Gul. Politics made his brain hurt; made him want to cry; made him want to focus on orbital mechanics and engineering instead; on spaceships and aircrafts and unexplored stars. He closed his eyes and welcomed in the darkness.

"I'm alright," he said.

Mr. Riker wasn't in school that Monday.

There was no explanation for it. Other teachers filled in for his class while he was away – first one day, then the next. They made cards for him on Wednesday, under Mrs. Mercurief's strict guidance: thick colored paper and graphmarkers, with Elissa and Gail coating theirs in heavy layers of glitter. Jeff drew a penis inside his, then tried to tell Mrs. Mercurief that it was a rocket ship when she checked the interior. On the other side of the room, Marnell studied the list of prompts Mrs. Mercurief had given them with a heavy weight in his stomach: *We miss you. Get well soon. Today, we learned about [insert topic here].*

Marnell's graphmarker scraped idly over the paper. He tried to think of something clever to say. Or something that would make Mr. Riker laugh. It felt important, somehow, to write something unique and personal, something that reflected what Mr. Riker had done for him with the replicator he'd fixed, with the Starfleet program. But they'd never made cards for a sick teacher before, and he couldn't get his marker to move. The broadcast from last night cycled through his head. The rumors. Kyle Riker. Finally, he scrawled, "Get well soon," on the interior, stark red marker on yellow paper, ugly and uninspired, like he didn't care. He handed it to Mrs. Mercurief, and there was nothing he could do.

Outside, at recess, the other kids made theories.

"I bet he got called to active duty," Norman said. "Like Jeff's dad."

Jeff's face spasmed.

"I didn't know your dad got called up!" Elissa said.

"No way," said Gail, "I swear I just saw him over in Anchorage this weekend. My dad said he was—"

“There’s no way they’d call Mr. Riker back to Starfleet,” Jeff interrupted, his voice extra loud. “Not with his hand.”

“Oh,” said Norman. “But I heard there’s Starfleet captains who even use a wheelchair.”

“Yeah, but he can’t go active duty if he’s always sick.” Jeff’s eyes roamed the playground and caught on Marnell. “I bet he’s out sick because of those scars,” Jeff said. “I bet they’re infected or something. Or maybe they used some weird new tool on them to make them hurt forever. Like a nerve-prod.” His eyes narrowed. “I bet a Cardassian gave him those scars.”

Marnell pretended not to hear. A short ways away, some of the Bajoran kids went quiet, listening in. A girl named Aza fingered her earring, her face lined and her eyes far away at the mention of a nerve-prod.

“He had to have fought in the Dominion War,” Norman agreed. “Otherwise what was he doing? *Everyone* in Starfleet fought in the Dominion War.”

“Exactly,” said Jeff. “And if he fought in the Dominion War, you know damn well he was out there killing Cardassians.” He walked a little closer to Marnell, angling toward him with the predatory grace of a panther. “Hey,” he said, kicking at the snow at Marnell’s feet. “You think he killed some Cardassians? How many do you think he killed?”

Marnell didn’t answer.

“Fifty,” Jeff said, aiming an imaginary phaser rifle at Marnell’s face. He squeezed one eye shut and whisper-mouthed the sound of an explosion. “A hundred.”

Marnell’s jaw tightened: the phaser-fire lighting up the sky on the way to school: the boy who bled out on the street, day after day: Grandpa’s body and the smell of bile.

“Maybe he’s not sick,” Jeff said. “Maybe he just left because of you. I wouldn’t want to look at you, either.”

Marnell couldn’t help himself. He struck out, strong-arming Jeff right in the chest, and Jeff fell back a step or two before he surged back and grappled with Marnell, trying to pull him into a headlock.

“I bet he got sick of seeing a Cardassian every day!” Jeff shouted, his smooth Human hands struggling to get a grip on Marnell’s neck. He slipped, cut himself on one of Marnell’s scales, and swore. A booted foot struck out at Marnell’s stomach and caught him in the ribs.

“Ow!” said Marnell, outraged. He threw himself on Jeff, fury taking over now, leathery hands curled into fists. “You shithead!” he cried, his voice breaking, going high and girlish in his anger. “Your dad’s a fucking deadbeat, Jeff! He’s not in Starfleet, he’s a drunk!”

He rained blows down on Jeff’s face, each punch lancing his scaly knuckles across Jeff’s cheekbones and leaving cuts. Jeff cried out and bucked wildly, unseating Marnell with a punch of his own. Tears of rage poured down Jeff’s cheeks, flushing him red, making him ugly – all around them, child witnesses backed away, no longer entertained. Just scared. Elbows struck ribs. Knees rammed into crotches. Crying in pain now, Marnell got a grip on Jeff’s hair and slammed his face into the snow, both of them screaming unintelligibly, bleeding, dripping snot from Marnell’s nose and blood from Jeff’s.

It was Mrs. Merculief who drove them to the hospital.

“Worst fight I’ve seen since Will goddamn Riker,” she muttered, glaring out the windshield. Marnell curled up against the door, resting his face on folded arms so he could subtly wipe the tears away. On the other side of the transport, Jeff was making odd, guttural noises, half-sob and half-growl as he tried to catch his breath.

“Am I going to be expelled?” asked Marnell, his voice small.

Mrs. Merculief shot a beady-eyed glare at him through the rearview mirror. She didn’t answer. Dad would say ‘no answer’ meant whatever you wanted it to be. He would say, “It’s up to you to craft it.” But taking Dad’s advice left a hollow ache in Marnell’s gut, and he couldn’t bring himself to hope. He stared out the window at the passing snowbanks and tiny houses, his tears slowly drying up, and across from him, Jeff’s fast-paced breathing calmed, quietened, turned to a pale, drawn silence.

I’m sorry, Marnell thought, but he couldn’t say it. They passed the refugee camp, where sometimes he saw Jeff in the food line, when his dad wasn’t home to feed him, and he had to hide his face against his arms.

At the hospital, Mrs. Merculief ushered them to the door. The cold air stung Marnell’s scrapes and bruises, especially where Jeff’s fingernails had prised his scales off and left the raw flesh underneath exposed. They rushed through the door together, to the waiting room, and sat side by side – miserable – while Mrs. Merculief joined the line.

“Marsha,” said an old grandpa-type who was waiting at the window, his face set in a scowl. Mrs. Merculief drew back, her expression flattening. Before she could respond – and Marnell got the strangest impression that it wouldn’t be a nice response – the old guy rapped on the glass and barked, “Can I get some service here?”

Marnell drew his knees up to his chest. Beside him, Jeff let out a long, shuddering sigh.

“Sir?” said the nurse on duty. “Patient or visitor?”

“Visitor,” the old man said.

“Can I get your name?”

“Kyle Riker,” he said, and Marnell’s head shot up. “I’m here to see my son.”

Jeff glanced sideways, he and Marnell both tuned in, their fight forgotten. At the window, Mrs. Mercurief turned slowly and gave them a reproving look, like they were supposed to somehow turn their sense of hearing off and erase this moment from their minds.

"I'll see if he's up to visitors," said the nurse.

"For God's sake. Just tell me what room he's in and—"

"I'll see if he's up to visitors," the nurse repeated, glacially calm. "Next."

Kyle Riker stayed at the window. He didn't move, as if he hadn't heard, until Mrs. Mercurief politely nudged him out of the way. He must have known her, since he greeted her by name, but in the end, he didn't speak to her. He wandered away from the window, fingers flexing, face ruddy and drawn into a scowl.

Jeff and Marnell watched him go.

"That guy's a dick," Jeff whispered.

"Seriously," Marnell said, scratching at his broken scales.

Their fight forgotten, they sat together, knees curled up to their chests. Jeff thought of his father, down and out in Anchorage, where the bars didn't know him by name just yet; Marnell thought of his dad, a loyal Cardassian guard, still stationed somewhere in the Union, avoiding trial for his crimes. As one, the boys glanced down the hall to the private rooms, where Mr. Riker must be staying.

"Poor guy," Jeff said.

Mr. Riker was back in school the week after that. He looked a little healthier, Marnell thought, like he'd gained weight in the hospital. There was some color in his face as he tapped the stack of 'get well soon' cards on his desk and thanked them.

"Really cheered me up," he said, and his smile seemed genuine.

"What were you sick with?" Elissa asked.

"Stomach bug," said Mr. Riker cheerfully. He taped the cards up above his display board, forming a sort of garland, cheerful reds and pinks, and Marnell's dreadful sterile card right in the center. As he reached above his head to secure a card, Mr. Riker's sleeve fell down a little, and Marnell caught just the quickest glimpse of a bandage on Mr. Riker's wrist. Then the garland was complete and Mr. Riker's hands were on his hips, and that little peek of a bandage was gone.

"Let's talk about World War Three," Mr. Riker said.

Detention was rotten, but Marnell supposed he had to be grateful that he only got detention. He couldn't bear to go back to the camp schoolhouse after all this. But still, detention was no picnic. It was Mr. Summers who led it, and he always made the kids run laps. He said he was scouting for his next track star, and kids who got into fights always made the fastest runners.

Marnell doubted that.

"How come Mr. Riker never does detention?" Jeff complained as Coach Summers jogged alongside them, sucking cold spring air into his lungs.

"Mr. Riker's sick of you," said Coach Summers lightly. "Marnell, where's your tuque?"

"I bet *he* wouldn't make us run laps!" Jeff said as Marnell fumbled with his sock hat, struggling to wedge it over his ears while still running.

"I bet he'd make you do a Starfleet regimen," Coach Summers countered. "He'd have you running six miles and doing a hundred push-ups, a hundred sit-ups, a hundred squats – come on, Marnell!"

Marnell huffed, his cheeks a dull gray. His chest ached from the cold air, but he forced himself to keep up.

"Is that really what he does?" Jeff asked, aiming the question at Marnell.

"What?"

"You do a Starfleet regimen with him, don't you?" said Jeff, his voice odd, mulish – but respectful. Marnell nearly tripped over his own feet. His too-big tuque slipped down over his brow ridges and obscured his vision, until all he could see was the snow.

"How do you know about that?" he demanded, pushing the hat back up.

"Calm down, kid," Coach Summers said, his voice flat. "Everyone knows." His face was shuttered, nowhere near as friendly as it had been a moment ago. To Jeff, he said, "Mr. Riker can't pull detention duty because he's on limited hours. Light duty. Part-time."

"What?" said Jeff, but Coach Summers kicked up his pace and left them in the dust. He called out encouragement to the older kids farther along the track, pretending not to hear Jeff's question. As the coach jogged out of sight, Marnell and Jeff slowed.

They shared a glance, eyebrows furrowed. Jeff stopped moving altogether, his hands on his hips as he caught his breath.

"I don't think he likes Mr. Riker," Jeff said, staring after Coach Summers.

"I thought they were friends," Marnell offered lamely. At least, they'd gone to school together. Coach Summers had said so once. But there was no mistaking the hard glint in his eye when he said Mr. Riker was on limited hours. Jeff and Marnell panted, the cold turning their breath into visible clouds.

"You *are* in a Starfleet program, right?" Jeff said suddenly.

"Yeah," said Marnell reluctantly.

Jeff nodded. A couple of sixth-graders came up behind them, and Jeff and Marnell edged off the track, closer to the edge of the woods. Without discussing it, they abandoned the path altogether and headed for the trees. There was an old hideout in here that all the kids knew about, a shelter built years ago by kids who must be old geezers by now. It had been pieced together from the forest's natural debris, shaped with young wood, fallen limbs and twigs that had gone stiff with age. Jeff ducked through the entrance and sat in the shadows, the moss roof blocking out all sunlight except what filtered through the open door.

"My dad really was in Starfleet," Jeff said, a challenging note in his voice.

"Okay," Marnell said.

"You believe me?"

Marnell shrugged. Jeff sprawled out on his belly, digging through the shoddy wood panels on the shelter floor until he found a hidden drawer. He pulled a dusty, old-school PADD out of the hole and fired it up.

"You want to look at dirty pictures?" he asked.

Marnell scooted closer. "Sure."

He watched as Jeff typed in 'boobs.' They stared silently at the results, unsure what to say. Eyes hooded, Jeff scrolled through page after page of programs, slow and steady, so they could take their time examining every hologram. Orion girls. Dancers. Risan models. No Cardassians, no Bajorans, no Humans. It was almost refreshing, Marnell thought, like the girls in the photos weren't real, like they'd never seen dead bodies in the street or watched their fathers die ... or watched their fathers torture people ... or watched their fathers drink till they passed out. He sighed, resting his chin in his hands, as a blue-skinned girl in a skimpy Starfleet uniform bared her breasts.

"I'm gonna be the first Cardassian in Starfleet," he decided.

"Shh," Jeff said. They watched the holo-girl divest herself of the uniform skirt and pantyhose, and then, blushing furiously, Jeff clicked to the next program.

"I am, though," Marnell said.

"No, you're not."

They watched a Klingon girl pound a Human man into submission. Jeff wrinkled his nose.

"Mr. Riker thinks I can do it," Marnell said, marshaling his bravery. "That's why he put me in the program."

"He thinks you can be in Starfleet," Jeff said, like that was a significant correction.

"Exactly."

"But you can't be the *first*," Jeff said. "There's *already* a Cardassian in Starfleet. Don't you watch the news?"

Marnell stared at him, so furious he was made speechless. What a rotten lie. But he watched helplessly, storm clouds gathering in his head, as Jeff banished the holo-girls and searched "Cardassian Starfleet" instead. Out of the hundreds of irrelevant results, Jeff plucked a news strip and set it to play.

"See?" he said. A photo shimmered before them – a Cardassian not much older than Marnell. Pudgier, genteel, soft-looking, teenage. He wore the blue uniform of a science officer and the pips of a cadet.

"No," Marnell whispered, crushed.

"Told you," said Jeff. He tapped the screen to call up the cadet's file. "Zurin Dakal," he said, reading the cadet's name. "He's a senior at the Academy."

"Maybe he won't graduate," Marnell said nervously.

"No, he will. He's already doing a work-study on a starship. This says only four cadets in the entire Academy got to do that this year."

"What ship?" Marnell demanded.

Jeff's fingers slid across the screen. A sleek new holo popped up, revealing a design for a starship Marnell didn't even recognize. It was beautiful: innovative, exciting, clearly a custom design, so prestigious it made his stomach sink.

"The U.S.S. *Titan*," Jeff read. "Commanding officer..." His voice faltered. Marnell leaned closer, and felt his breathing stutter as he read the name and saw the picture.

"William T. Riker."

Their teacher, healthy and ruddy without a single gray hair on his head, smiled back at them from a Starfleet personnel photo. The caption bore out Jeff's assertion: "Commanding Officer, U.S.S. *Titan*." Rank: captain. Silently, Marnell slid into place at Jeff's side, each of them reading the file without breathing.

"Look at all those medals," Jeff muttered finally, hovering over Riker's service record.

"Hero of Wolf 359," Marnell read.

"Look. Inventor of the Riker Maneuver."

"No way!"

"He was there when the Remans attacked—" Jeff cut himself off. Marnell scanned the section on the Dominion War. He didn't recognize many of the honors Riker had received, but the sheer length of the list turned his hands cold. He reached past Jeff to banish the list and read Riker's personal info instead.

Wife: Deanna Troi, it said.

"He's married?" Jeff said.

"Maybe not anymore," said Marnell, sinking back on his haunches. "This is all old news. Obviously."

"It says he's still on a mission." Jeff snorted. "Mission to Valdez Elementary!"

"But that cadet's still out there?" Marnell asked, not daring to hope. "With the *Titan*?"

Jeff rolled over on his side. "Yeah," he said. "That part is new. I just saw it on the news last week. They just haven't updated the personnel files yet. I wonder who the new captain is?"

Marnell pulled his knees up to his chest. Outside, in the distance, he could hear Coach Summers running the lap again, calling their names. Zurin Dakal, the file said. And Mr. Riker *had* to know, and he'd never said a word. Maybe he hadn't even realized that Marnell wanted to be the first.

That stung, somehow, worse than anything. The idea that it never occurred to him. That he might not know.

"Marnell?" Jeff asked as Coach Summers called for them again.

Marnell shook his head. "I'm not going back," he said.

It was a Saturday, and Marnell was supposed to be in early-morning detention, but he was in the woods instead.

He'd called off sick on Thursday. He'd skipped school Friday, without Mom's permission. Today, he'd gotten all the way to Valdez Elementary before a numbness took hold. It wasn't that he didn't *want* to run. Or that he didn't want to talk to Jeff, or see Coach Summers. It was that he couldn't do it: couldn't imagine lifting his feet that fast or going through the motions, swinging his arms, inflating his lungs with cold, crisp air. Couldn't imagine unlocking his jaw to speak to anybody.

So he turned around and walked into the woods instead.

He didn't know how far he went. The sun was high now; it had to be close to noon, and Marnell's feet were sore. He crossed a bubbling creek by balancing on a rock path some other child had set down for him decades earlier, and he sat on crumbling river bank on the other side. Mom had packed him a sandwich from the replicator, and as he ate it, he thought of the day last fall when he'd sneaked his replicator into school, stuffing it into his backpack, praying the other kids wouldn't see, wouldn't ask. He'd stayed after in history class to talk to Mr. Riker, and when all the other students filed out, he'd taken the replicator from his bag and slid it across Mr. Riker's desk, scraping the wood.

"Let's see," Mr. Riker had said, popping the panel open. He held it in his left hand and awkwardly probed the wires with his damaged right. Easier to work with that hand, even when there were only two fingers. "What recipes do you like?" Mr. Riker asked.

Marnell just stared at him.

"Larish pie?" Mr. Riker guessed. "Candied canka nuts?"

Marnell blinked. "Halant stew...?" he said hesitantly.

Mr. Riker's eyes lit up. "Halant stew," he said approvingly. "I know that one." And his stiff injured fingers darted across the programming screen, setting a template into place. "This won't take long. I've programmed replicators before. Why don't you grab a PADD and look up some of your favorites? It'll go faster."

Marnell nodded, but instead of sitting at his desk, he hovered by Mr. Riker's side. "Can I watch?" he asked.

Mr. Riker paused. His pale eyes found Marnell's. "Sure," he said, unguarded. "Yeah. That way if it breaks..."

Marnell nodded.

On the bank of the creek, he took a bite of the replicated sandwich and chewed slowly, savoring the rubbery flesh of Cardassian fish, the slick brown sauce that he liked best, a tang of the sea, of something gamey and mushroomy – something he never got to taste in Human foods. His eyes closed. Cold water trickled over the rocks, popping whenever the fish poked their heads through to sample the algae.

In the woods behind him, there came a quiet rustle of leaves.

Marnell sat still, holding his breath, the taste of fish still glowing on his tongue. He slid the sandwich halfway into its biodegradable wrapping, just in case something large and hungry came through and he had to beat it in a hurry. Ears pricked, he listened as the animal edged closer, slow and plodding, not too urgent—

And Mr. Riker broke through the underbrush on the edge of Curtis Creek.

He blinked down at Marnell. Marnell blinked up at him.

“Hello,” Mr. Riker said.

Marnell’s fingers twitched on his sandwich wrapping. He thought of the Cardassian cadet on the USS Titan and his throat closed up. “Hi,” he managed, his voice choked.

Mr. Riker’s cheeks hollowed out, like he was biting them from the inside. He took a hesitant step forward and stood on the bank of the creek, close enough to get his toes wet. Wrapped in a bulky parka, he looked thinner than normal, his hair overgrown from the short-cropped haircut he’d had when Marnell first met him. He stared out at the water, arms folded tight over his flat stomach, eyes dark. Marnell swallowed past the lump in his throat, his appetite gone, and waited for a reprimand.

“I used to fish here when I was a kid,” Mr. Riker said absently. He ground his toe into the sediment at the edge of the creek, exposing broken shells and soggy twigs. “When I wanted to get away from home.” He glanced sideways at Marnell, a mischievous smile lighting up his thin features. “Or school,” he said.

Marnell flushed.

“Don’t you have detention today?” asked Mr. Riker, but there was a laugh in his voice. It didn’t sound like a reprimand.

“Yeah,” Marnell admitted. “I didn’t go.”

“Who’d you have, Mr. Summers?”

Marnell nodded as Mr. Riker took a seat nearby, knees bent.

“I bet he’d have you running laps,” Mr. Riker said, his fingers locked around his knees. His eyes tracked the forest, but not like a military officer tracks, searching for danger – like a tourist enjoying the view. His face was soft. “You done with school, then?” he asked.

Done with school? Marnell stared at him, not understanding. Affably, Mr. Riker met his eyes.

“You keep skipping,” he said. “I thought maybe you’d given up on the training program.”

“The Starfleet program?” asked Marnell. He wasn’t able to hide a sudden swell of emotion in his voice: bitter, betrayed, close to tears. He looked away sharply and his hands squeezed tight on the sandwich, squishing it beneath the wrapper.

“Yeah,” Mr. Riker said softly. “The Starfleet program.”

There was something in his voice, too. Something that cooled Marnell’s grief and left him blinking rapidly, too weary to talk.

“Is it worth it?” he asked finally, staring at his own mud-streaked shoes.

A light breeze ruffled Mr. Riker’s hair. Creases marked the corners of his eyes and carved out hollows in his cheeks. He looked ten, twenty years older than the Starfleet profile Marnell had seen. Cut to the bone.

“Is it worth it?” Mr. Riker mused, eyes on Curtis Creek. “I don’t know if I’m the right guy to ask.”

Marnell’s brow creased. He let his sandwich fall back into his bag, no longer hungry. “Why did you leave?” he asked.

Riker’s eyes tightened. He shifted his grip on his knees, his thumb coming up to rub over the old wounds on his right hand, stroking the scars. Shoulders tense, he studied Curtis Creek and chewed the inside of his cheek, where scars shined silver and cut right through his beard, preventing any hair from growing where he’d been hurt. His chest rose and fell in a long slow sigh.

“Mr. Riker?” Marnell asked.

Mr. Riker tried to smile. He met Marnell’s eyes, a little strained, and reached into his parka. “Do you watch the news at home, Marnell?”

He thought of Mom curling up in bed with him, the tension in her shoulders as a news strip played.

“Sometimes,” he said.

Mr. Riker lifted the PADD. “You mind if I...? I actually came out here to...”

Marnell said nothing.

“Well,” said Mr. Riker finally, “it’s easier to watch it here than in the house.”

Marnell didn’t understand, but he sensed it didn’t matter. Mr. Riker didn’t expect him to. Beside him, Mr. Riker fired up the PADD. The lines

on his face eased as sound cut through the forest, relieving him of any duty to talk to Marnell. Maybe that should have hurt, but Marnell just felt ... released. He scooted closer to Mr. Riker so he could see the PADD, too, even though he disliked politics. Someone named Jean-Luc Picard had been promoted to admiral. Someone on Deep Space Nine was being tried for war crimes. And on Cardassia Prime, Gul Dor Rikk was giving his victory speech.

This was the news broadcast Mr. Riker settled on. On the screen, hordes of Cardassian citizens flooded the streets, a celebration turning into a riot. Windows smashed. Elated faces cheered into the camera. Marnell searched the crowd, halfway-hoping to see his father, halfway-dreading it. Tough on crime, loyal to Cardassia, Gul Dor Rikk's campaign points hammered into their heads. As the riot footage faded, the Bajoran candidate, Onu Yumelo, faced the camera for a solemn, hard-eyed speech.

"The Bajoran people survived five decades of subjugation," she said calmly. "We survived massacres and labor camps like Lazon II, where I sacrificed the best years of my life to Cardassian guards who wanted nothing more than to see me dead." She lifted her chin, tilted her head just slightly to the right, let the scars on her ear show through. "We will survive this, too," she said grimly. "And we will be the only ones who do."

The broadcast cycled. A dour newsman read the statistics and broke down the provinces one by one. Clips of Yumelo's speech repeated, sometimes unaltered, sometimes drowned out by Cardassian pundits treating it like a war declaration, demanding that Starfleet sanction Yumelo and escort her off Cardassia Prime at once.

Marnell let it all wash over him. At his side, holding the PADD carefully, Mr. Riker hid his face against his arm. All Marnell could see of him was his ear, a bit of his jawline, scars reaching up to meet his scalp. Mr. Riker inhaled slowly, shakily – sniffed once – and when he pressed his face harder against his sleeve to wipe the tears away, Marnell pretended not to notice he was crying.

He stared out at Curtis Creek until Mr. Riker composed himself. Red-eyed, Mr. Riker thumbed the PADD's off button and killed the noise. Only nature remained, snow melting, water rushing, a few brave spring birds flitting from branch to branch. Mr. Riker scrubbed his eyes and tucked the PADD away.

His voice, when he spoke, was even:

"Let me teach you how to fly a plane."

The Bajorans didn't live in a camp like Marnell. They had a neighborhood – mixed Bajoran, with some Humans – in Valdez, close to the harbor, where they could see the orcas and watch the ships come in. On Sunday, Marnell rode his bike down the Bajoran streets, the spice of unfamiliar alien foods filling the air. Some of the children playing outside were his classmates, but they didn't say hi to him. They pretended not to see him or they stuck their noses in their PADDs.

It was only on the dock, where he was supposed to meet Jeff, that he found out what had happened. Norman was there in a windbreaker and shorts, his knobby knees shaking from the cold, darting in and out of an unlocked motorboat that he swore belonged to his uncle.

"I gotta see this," Jeff was saying as Marnell slowed, his bike wheels rattling over the dock's slats and his brakes squealing.

"See what?" Marnell asked.

"That Bajoran lady got Mr. Riker to quit his job," said Norman cheerfully, swinging from the boat's gate.

"Eh?" said Marnell.

Norman swung back into the boat and jumped off the gate, letting it flap shut behind him. Jeff followed, hands in his pockets to stave off the sea breeze. At Marnell's back was nothing but Bajorans and at his front was nothing but open sea. He followed, too.

"Here," Norman said from inside the cabin. "My uncle doesn't put locks on his PADDs."

Marnell ducked through and let his eyes adjust. The inside of the boat was cramped, old leather seats giving off a smell he hated, a sort of decaying sterility that always reminded him of the shuttlecraft he and Mom had flown on when they fled Cardassia. He squeezed between Norman and Jeff at the console to stare at an old, fat PADD screen built into the wall.

"What Bajoran lady?" he asked, thinking of his classmates' mothers.

"The one who tried to take over Cardassia," Jeff said.

"Eh?"

On the screen, a staticky picture of Onu Yumelo jumped to life. Marnell's heart skipped a beat at the sight of her angular face and subtle scars.

"How did *she* get Mr. Riker to quit his job?" he asked.

"She *knows* him," said Norman gleefully.

"No, she doesn't." Exasperated, Marnell tried to shut the PADD off, but Jeff wrestled his hand away and Norman kicked him in the shin. He fought them off and stepped back, arms crossed. "Mr. Riker didn't quit," he said.

"He did so!"

"I saw Mrs. Mercurief at the barbershop and she told me so," said Jeff flatly. "He's not coming back on Monday."

“Then who’s going to teach us?” asked Marnell, his heart rate kicking up.

“Who cares?” Norman turned back to the PADD screen. “Check this out.”

He clicked a button and Yumelo’s picture disappeared. A wall of tiny text filled the screen in Federation Basic. Marnell leaned closer to read it, a headache throbbing in his temples. Medical records. Court transcripts. Suicide attempts and trauma syndrome, malnutrition, STIs and medical torture, and there, at the bottom, was the signature of the man who ordered it all: Gul Dor Rikk.

“Creepy, huh?” Norman said, pointing out some of the details. A fight in Lazon II. A guard punched in the face. A swift, permanent punishment. “I guess that’s how he lost his fingers.”

Marnell’s throat closed up. Norman clicked a line of text and it expanded into a photo: an emaciated prisoner with familiar blue eyes, his head shaved to prevent lice, his right hand coated in blood.

“What are the court transcripts?” he asked, his voice trembling.

Norman shrugged. Jeff folded his arms on the console’s edge and squinted at the screen. “Collaboration,” he read. “Terrorism. Cool!”

Marnell couldn’t speak. He shoved his hands into his pockets and risked a peek at the photo again. Of Mr. Riker’s dead eyes and his exposed collarbones and his mangled hand. A hard smile curled his mouth, canines digging into a raw wound on his bottom lip, daring whoever held the camera to hurt him again.

“There’s more,” said Norman, studying Marnell. When Marnell met his eyes, Norman waggled his eyebrows and reached for the screen. “More pictures. Better pictures.” A slow grin slid across his face. “You should see what they’re saying about him on the news.”

“What?” asked Marnell numbly.

“I should just show you.” Norman clicked through to the medical file again, his fingers hovering over two words on the screen – two words that sank into the coils of Marnell’s brain and wiped all emotion away, replaced it with a soul-deep queasiness that left him swallowing bile. “No wonder he’s not coming back to school,” Norman said.

Marnell turned away. Jeff’s fingers curled around Norman’s wrist, staying his hand.

Sexual assault. Gul Dor Rikk’s whore. Heat pounded through Marnell’s stomach like a heartbeat, heavy and fast. It folded his guts into thirds and squeezed the contents up toward his throat, until every breath burned his nasal cavity. He thought of the shelter in the woods – of Curtis Creek – of Jeff and his PADD full of naked Orion girls – of Mr. Riker fixing his replicator – of Onu Yumelo losing the election and Kyle Riker backing Gul Dor Rikk–

He was sick on the motorboat’s floor.

Their new history teacher was a retiree named Mr. Frazier. He wore too-small shirts that hugged his ample stomach, and since he never put on undershirts, Marnell could always see Mr. Frazier’s nipples poking through. He had a thin nasally voice and only wanted to talk about his pet zumot-cat. The girls made fun of him. The boys recoiled when he tried to give them tips on gravball at recess. Marnell just tried to ignore him entirely.

It was easier that way.

Outside, in town, Marnell never saw Mr. Riker anymore, but he heard his name everywhere he went. At the market, Hal and Dave discussed the medical report together. At school, the lunch chaperones whispered to each other, thinking that the children couldn’t hear. And at home–

At home, they watched the news footage of Yumelo and her take-back campaign, a group of freedom fighters taking pot-shots at the Union – and they watched it while eating food from Mr. Riker’s replicator. Mom stirred a bowl of fish soup, her eyes locked to the PADD screen. She didn’t flinch when the name ‘Riker’ came up; not like Marnell did. But she glanced sideways at her son, as if noticing him for the first time.

“Your teacher called,” she said.

Marnell sat silently, watching as Yumelo took credit for an explosion on Cardassia Prime. She was waving her fist with calculated passion, calling for Bajorans galaxy-wide to rise up. “*Their peace treaty,*” she said, meaning the Federation and the Cardassians, “*is not ours!*”

“Mrs. Mercurief told me he had you in some kind of training program,” Mom prodded.

“Yeah.”

“Starfleet?”

Marnell didn’t answer. Mom picked a flake of seaweed out of her bowl and deposited it on top of Marnell’s rice bed. She knew he liked them, but today he just scraped his fork against the plate and buried the seaweed in his rice.

“Well, I told her I wanted you in it, Riker or no Riker,” she said. “And *today*, Mr. Riker called–”

That got Marnell’s attention. “You meant *that* teacher?” he exclaimed.

“Well, yeah–”

“Why didn’t you say so?” He leapt to his feet, eyes wild. “Is he–?”

“Marnie, he got off the comm hours ago,” said Mom, pushing him back into his seat. “Eat your rice.”

Marnell’s hand clenched around his fork. “What did he say?”

Mom turned back to the PADD. A Starfleet diplomat – Vulcan – spoke in calm, unemotional tones about Yumelo’s latest scheme. “*Peace is our first priority,*” he said. “*Peace above all else.*”

“I said you could use a tutor,” Mom said. “And I’d prefer it be a Starfleet officer, if that’s what you want to study.” She glanced sideways at Marnell. “Yes?”

He couldn’t speak. He stared at her, his eyes wide and liquid, his fork quivering in his hand. Mom scanned his face – softened – pulled him into a side-arm hug so she could keep one eye on the news while he buried his face in her chest. Did he want to be in Starfleet? He didn’t know. But he couldn’t keep going with the kid-level math and science at Valdez Elementary. He couldn’t let the opportunity to fly slip through his fingers.

He couldn’t stop seeing the man who fixed his replicator.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice small.

“Like this,” Mr. Riker said.

He scratched a schematic out on a sheet of old-fashioned paper from the replicator. Marnell watched closely, memorizing every line. He found it easy to concentrate in Mr. Riker’s house. Out on the edge of town, secluded, it was quieter than the refugee camp, quieter even than the nice houses in the suburbs where kids like Norman lived. It cleared his brain the same way Curtis Creek did, and sunlight streamed through the windows and left a soft glow on the wooden walls, the floorboards. You could see every speck of dust floating in the air.

“I like it here,” Marnell said.

Mr. Riker didn’t answer. The soft background music covered up his silence. Jazz. Mr. Riker’s bad hand tapped out the rhythm, an unconscious twitching of the fingers as the music played.

“It’s easy to concentrate,” Marnell said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” He thought of the Cardassian refugee camp where he and Mom lived, with the constant noise, the dirty houses passed from one family to the next without basic sanitation services in between. “It’s clean,” he said, and he swiped his palm over Mr. Riker’s kitchen table to prove it. No dust. “Like my house back home.”

Mr. Riker grunted in acknowledgment. “Clean,” he mused. He studied the house: its bare walls, devoid of pictures; its empty shelves, its sparse new furniture, bare bones, only the necessities. “I guess you could say that,” he said, returning to the schematic.

“Did you grow up here?” Marnell asked, thrilled by the idea.

“Yes,” Mr. Riker said. He sketched out a new picture, this time for orbital mechanics. Dark eyelashes stood out stark against his pale cheeks as he worked.

“It must be nice,” Marnell decided. He glanced around at the log cabin one more time. “Living here. Where you grew up.”

Mr. Riker studied Marnell, his face unreadable, and went back to the sketchpaper. Through the doorway, around the corner, there was a bedroom, the door hanging open just enough for Marnell to see the darkness inside. The lack of furniture. Unused. Grandpa’s sword. The smell of bile. Dad’s transport missing from the carpark. Cardassia’s shields sparking, children dying in the street.

“You said–” he faltered, and there was only the steady scratch of Mr. Riker’s pencil and the low thrum of jazz. “You said you’d teach me how to fly.”

The scratching stopped. Mr. Riker kept his head down, long hair falling in a tangle over his forehead. He hadn’t cut it all year, Marnell suspected. It was still uneven, grown out from where he must have shaved it down or chopped it with a knife before coming to Valdez. A scar zig-zagged through the dark swath of his hair, like a thin river on an old-fashioned map, cutting through the jungle. Mr. Riker glanced up with just his eyes.

“You still want to?” he asked.

“Yes,” Marnell said.

Mr. Riker’s eyes narrowed in an uneven squint, not quite a smile. He set his pencil aside, his equations abandoned, and in the sunlight streaming through the windows, he looked a little less tired and pale than earlier, when he answered the door.

“Then I’ll teach you,” he said.

All down the streets of Valdez, people stared at Mr. Riker and the Cardassian boy who followed at his side. They muttered to each other. They didn’t say a word to Mr. Riker’s face. But a few months ago, Marnell knew, everyone in Valdez would be stopping to say, “Hi, Will,” and ask about his career, about his dad.

Now nobody would look him in the eye.

“Here,” said Mr. Riker, hitting a button and stopping the pavement flat. They’d reached an expansive building on the very edge of town, where the rotating sidewalk ground to a halt and reversed. Mr. Riker stepped off the panels and rested on a low stone wall.

“This is it?” Marnell asked, studying the plain glass door.

“Yep.” Mr. Riker laid a hand across his ribs. Beneath his parka, he was shivering, but his face was flushed and sweat glittered in his hair.

“Are you okay?” asked Marnell, eyeing Mr. Riker when he didn’t get up.

“Fine,” he said, voice clipped. “Just…”

Marnell shifted his feet. Mr. Riker let the sentence trail into nothing and averted his eyes. They listened to the slow grind of the pavement and the subtle shaky quality of Mr. Riker’s breath. Marnell didn’t know what could possibly be so wearying about a pavement ride. Mr. Riker wasn’t fat. He wasn’t elderly. He ought to be able to ride the panels without sitting down to rest. But Riker wiped a sheen of sweat away from his brow and hung his head between his knees, his breath still shallow.

“Go inside, Marnell,” he said finally, his voice thin. “They’ll tell you what to do.”

“But—” said Marnell.

Mr. Riker turned away. The muscles of his back were so tight and thin that Marnell could see them outlined through the parka. He swallowed his words and backed up, right through the welcoming glass doors.

Inside, the flight academy was sterile, the smell of oil and wax strong enough to sting Marnell’s nose. His shoes squeaked as he walked through the empty front office, looking for a comm. He didn’t find one; he didn’t have to. Before he’d finished scanning the area, a white-haired Human in coveralls emerged from the hangar with a grin.

“You must be the kid Will was telling me about,” he said, holding out a callused hand for a shake. “I’m John Bowen, but you can call me Chief.”

“Chief,” said Marnell, trying it out. Chief tapped a badge on his coveralls. Wings, silver and official-looking, significant, like Marnell was supposed to recognize them and understand what they meant.

“Former Starfleet,” Chief said proudly. “Where’s Will? You leave him outside?”

Marnell nodded. He was trying to figure out how to explain it, but Chief strode past him and glanced through the glass door. His smile twitched, became less natural, as he and Marnell studied Mr. Riker’s silhouette: curled in on himself, hands tight in his hair, back turned to the door.

“Well, we’ll let him rest a while,” said Chief, his tone carefully controlled. He put a hand on Marnell’s shoulder and steered him away. “You know, I taught Will how to fly too, when he was your age.”

‘Will’ again. Marnell said nothing.

“He was a firecracker,” Chief said with a grin.

“Mrs. Mercurief says I’m a firecracker,” said Marnell. “I beat up Jeff Walborn at school.” He tensed his shoulders, hyper-aware of the still-healing scale-less patches on his neck, where Jeff had torn the flesh.

“Hm,” said Chief, not disapproving, but not pleased either. “He *would* pick a fighter. Well, I’ll show you the ropes while we wait for Will. He’ll want to get started right away.”

He led Marnell to the hangar. Small aircraft lined the hardwood floors, spaced evenly apart. Massive doors, bigger than any barn, led to the runway outside. Marnell craned his neck to study the nearest plane – enormous up close, bigger than he’d imagined, twice the size of a shuttle.

Only then did Chief’s words catch up with him.

“You’re not going to teach me?” he asked. “Mr. Riker is?”

“Who else?” said Chief.

Outside, through the glass, Mr. Riker wiped his face, ground his palms into his eyes, and breathed. Just breathed.

It was weeks before Marnell caught his mother paying Mr. Riker. It wasn’t much – just the handful of credits they would have been spending at the market, if he hadn’t fixed their replicator for them. Mr. Riker couldn’t look her in the eye. He let her slide the money into his palm, and he closed his fingers, and he put his hands into his pockets and kept his head down the whole time.

It was later that month when Marnell took his first flight in the co-pilot’s seat. It was that same day that he overheard Chief yelling at Mr. Riker in his office. Not for taking the flight – that part was okay. For arguing about the money.

“If you’re teaching that boy at *my* flight academy, then damn straight you’re my employee,” Chief said. “And my employees get *paid!*”

Mr. Riker left that day with a chit in his hand. He held it, dazed, as they waited for the pavement to warm up and slide them into town. He didn’t seem to hear Marnell’s excited chatter about the flight. He just clutched the chit – his payment – and stared out at the runway. Beneath

his patchy beard, the scars twitched and his chin trembled, but his eyes stayed dry.

At school, the history teacher was still Mr. Frazier, and at the old Riker house on the edge of town, money from Marnell's mother and Chief John Bowen kept the security system humming all night long.

"Bajorans rise up!" Aza shouted from the top of the jungle gym, her fist thrust into the air.

Across the playground, Marnell's classmates cheered. He sat far off, on an old wooden fence at the edge of the woods, with Jeff at his side. Jeff whooped and clapped his hands to encourage Aza, but he didn't join the other kids as they swarmed the jungle gym and broke into a mock-battle.

"They're not serious," he said to Marnell carelessly.

"I know," said Marnell, not convinced. Jeff eyed him, and Marnell tensed – because when Jeff eyed him, it usually meant an attack was coming. Sure enough, Jeff's hand darted out, closing on Marnell's jacket and trying to shove him off the fence. Marnell was prepared, his muscles tight, and he shoved Jeff back, both of them grappling until they wobbled too far and broke apart with a panicked laugh.

"They couldn't beat you up anyway," Jeff decided, regaining his balance. Marnell's hands clenched tight on the wooden fence, old splinters digging into his palms. "I heard they got you in judo."

"Yeah," said Marnell.

"I wish I could do judo."

Marnell chewed his lip. "Maybe you could," he said, watching the Bajoran kids vote on which Human should play Gul Dorr Rik for a game of chase. "You could do the Starfleet program."

Jeff's duct-taped sneakers swung idly, a few inches off the ground. He shifted on the fence. "I'm not smart enough," he said.

That was probably true. Jeff's grades were some of the worst in Valdez Elementary. Marnell searched for some other way to comfort him.

"You can take judo classes without being in the program," he said.

"Yeah." Jeff paused. "But then you have to pay. Starfleet won't sponsor me."

No, they wouldn't – that was true, too. Marnell thought of Mr. Riker – he'd sponsor Jeff, wouldn't he? – he'd do it out of pocket, with his own money – but he'd seen Mr. Riker counting his credits nervously the other night, when his security system abruptly stopped humming.

"Maybe your dad can teach you judo," Marnell said.

Jeff just laughed. On the playground, Norm raced away from the other kids, shouting anti-Bajoran slurs in an over-the-top Cardassian accent. Aza caught him first, her knobby knees driving into his back as she tackled him to the ground. Cheers went up, Human and Bajoran, raised in Yumelo's fight song.

Only we will survive, Yumelo had said.

"Wake up," Mom whispered.

Her sharp-clawed fingers dug into Marnell's shoulder, shaking him awake. Bleary-eyed, he blinked into the darkness, watched the shadows resolve into his mother's face, too close, too urgent.

"Mom?" he asked, sitting bolt upright.

Her hand stayed on his shoulder, holding him in place, keeping him calm. "We have to go," she said, and only then did he realize that she wasn't wearing her pajamas. It was pitch-black outside and Mom was fully dressed. Marnell's heart slammed into his throat. He swung his feet over the side of the bed, quick, silent, no-nonsense, gathering his things into his backpack from school.

Outside, shouts filtered through the walls, coming from the far side of the camp. He should have heard them earlier. Should have woken on his own. Marnell shoved his favorite jersey into his backpack and glanced questioningly at his mom as she rushed through the rooms, gathering – who knew what. She spotted him, scanned him, said, "Put on as many clothes as you can and still run."

Marnell obeyed. Five minutes later, they snuck out the back door, into the alleyway where the other refugees hung their laundry out to dry in summer. A crash of broken glass exploded at the mouth of the alley, and Marnell saw a flash of fire just as Mom grabbed him by the elbow and steered him away.

Back streets. Other people's yards. They avoided the main roads. They kept their heads down. If there was phaser-fire, Marnell didn't see it. If there were weapons whining through the neighborhood, he didn't hear it. He just heard shouting, angry, not afraid, and slaps, and crashes—

And then they were out of the refugee camp, and Marnell saw a skimmer that he recognized parked outside. It belonged to Aza's father. Mom squeezed Marnell's hand and dragged him away.

"What's going on?" he asked, brave enough to speak now that they were out on the streets of Valdez.

"Keep your hood up," Mom said, voice clipped. "Nothing's going on yet."

He glanced behind him. At three different spots in the camp, he saw fire creeping high, lighting up silhouettes of humanoids – he couldn't tell if the figures were Cardassian or Bajoran. As he watched, one of the fires winked out, already extinguished, and Mom jerked him forward by the hand.

“Marnell,” she said. “Please.”

He jogged to keep up. When they reached the suburbs, Mom paused to activate the sidewalk panels, her hand shaking on the controls. The hum was loud, but out here, it was safer. It wasn't likely to call any bad attention or impede their escape: it would just wake a few sleeping fishermen, and they'd grumble about the noise in the morning. Marnell turned to watch the refugee camp disappear as the pavement carried him farther away.

“We can go back later,” Mom assured him. “For anything you forgot.”

“Okay,” he said, but he couldn't think of anything he wanted. After leaving Cardassia Prime the same way, Marnell could list every single possession in his bedroom, and he didn't feel particularly attached. He had his PADD for schoolwork, his running shoes, his favorite gravball jersey. That was all he needed.

The pavement brought them to a darkened house, where the security system was buzzing and someone had spray-painted over the walls. Cardboard covered up a newly-broken window. It was different from just a few days ago, when Marnell last visited, but it was still Mr. Riker's house.

Mom stepped off the sidewalk panel, and reluctantly, Marnell followed. He stood silently behind her as she rang the chime. It was still late, the sky dark, so far from morning, and Marnell's eyes itched as he waited for Mr. Riker to answer the door.

“We're staying here?” he whispered, half-embarrassed, half-relieved.

“Shh,” Mom said.

The door opened. Mr. Riker leaned heavily on the doorframe, his hair mussed from sleep. A worn black t-shirt hung from his shoulders, the fabric torn, like he'd been wearing it for years and never learned to mend it. Eyes half-closed, he took in Marnell and his mother and stepped aside.

“What happened?” he asked, voice rusty.

Marnell stepped into the darkened parlor. He'd never seen Mr. Riker's house without the lights on before; it was strange now, unfamiliar, like a maze.

“Yumelo's so-called revolutionaries,” said Mom, her voice bitter.

“Refugees attacking refugees,” Mr. Riker muttered. His good hand came up, squeezed Mom's shoulder. “You okay?”

Marnell didn't hear her answer, but soon Mr. Riker was touching him, just the barest brush of his two-fingered hand against Marnell's arm.

“Are *you* okay?” he asked.

Marnell lifted his chin. With cold Cardassian pride, he said, “I'm fine.”

Mr. Riker studied his face. Slowly, he nodded. He rubbed the back of his neck and pivoted on bare feet, eyeing his own rooms like he didn't recognize them. Whatever Mr. Riker murmured to Mom, Marnell didn't really hear it. He followed them numbly as Mr. Riker showed them to their rooms: the master bedroom for Mom, with a fold-out bed that looked unused and blankets that smelled crisp, fresh out of the plastiwrap. Mr. Riker shuffled down the hallway and unlocked a door there, his face tight as he peeked inside.

“You can have the sick room,” he said to Marnell.

Marnell balked. But he couldn't show it. He stepped inside, and relaxed a little when he saw the ‘sick room’ wasn't so bad. There was a wide, tall window on the western wall, facing the forest, and a low contoured bed, well-used and broken in. Old crochet blankets and doilies littered the furniture, and the wooden furniture was dusty, with patterns carved into the surface by a boy's clumsy whittling knife.

“The sick room?” Marnell asked, clutching his backpack.

Mr. Riker's face spasmed. “Uh...” He scratched at the scar in his hairline. “I didn't mean...” He dropped his hand, too tired to think of a lie. “This was my mom's room,” he said simply. “It's not contagious.”

“Okay.” Marnell set his backpack down carefully on the old bed. It smelled faintly of citrus, like someone had carefully scrubbed and perfumed it, and then set the mattress back in place. He shrugged out of his coat, and the windbreaker underneath, and caught Mr. Riker staring blankly at an old photo on the wall: a photo of a family and a baby, and the log cabin they were standing in right now.

“How did she die?” Marnell asked.

Mr. Riker blinked. His injured hand shifted, fingers scraping over scars. “She was a Starfleet officer,” he said. “She picked up an alien disease on a mission – the transport scrubbers didn't catch it.”

Starfleet. The man in the photo wore a Starfleet insignia too, and he was grinning wide, his face open, so different from the old grouch in the hospital that Marnell almost didn't recognize him as Kyle Riker.

“Thanks,” said Marnell. “For letting us stay here.”

Eyes still on that photo, Mr. Riker murmured, “Any time.”

At school, they didn’t talk about the news. Marnell saw the photos only from Jeff: burnt-out houses, Cardassian neighbors picking through the rubble to find their replicators and med supplies. Only a few homes had been destroyed. Easy to rebuild.

At recess, Aza sat beneath the jungle gym, scratching designs into the dirt with her index finger. When the other kids played Yumelo, Aza pretended not to hear. Sitting on the fence, Jeff and Marnell were not invited.

“My dad’s a dick,” Aza told him at lunch, when she sat at his side.

“Mine is, too,” Jeff said, stabbing his mashed potatoes.

“So is mine,” said Marnell.

They ate in silence, for a little bit. Then Aza nodded to herself and scooted her tray away, back to her Bajoran friends. She didn’t talk to Jeff and Marnell again.

Marnell couldn’t sleep. He lay in bed, inhaling the scent of citrus. He’d found an old music disk in the drawer next to his bed – the sick bed. He’d been listening to it for hours, with the wide long window covered up so he couldn’t see outside, and nobody lurking out there could see him. Today, when he came home from school, he’d gotten a good look at the graffiti on Mr. Riker’s house. It said, “MAQUIS.”

The Maquis were Bajoran. Marnell knew that. He’d heard his Grandpa rant about them a dozen times. So who had spray-painted that word on Mr. Riker’s side paneling? One of the Cardassian refugees – even though Mr. Riker was sheltering them? Or one of the Bajorans?

It made Marnell’s head ache. He squinted at the music disk, the jazz musicians unfamiliar to him, and selected somebody named Louis Armstrong. The confident brass wail of a trumpet split his ear drums and settled like smooth honey into his veins.

Maquis. Was Mr. Riker part of the Maquis? You couldn’t be a terrorist and Starfleet at the same time. But that was what his court transcripts said: terrorism. Marnell thumbed the music disk’s controls, the buttons worn down from someone else’s hands. How old was Mr. Riker when his mom died? Maybe he used to sit here, in that wooden chair next to her bed, listening to music, watching her chest rise and fall as she breathed. Maybe one day he came to check on her and smelled bile in the air, and saw flies landing on her open eyes. Like Grandpa.

Marnell shut the music disk off. His eyes itched from lack of sleep. He swung his legs over the side of the sick bed and stood. Outside, the halls were dark, but not entirely silent. Static whispered from the living room. Something thumped: there was a sharp breath, harsh and whistling through clenched teeth. Slowly, Marnell approached and glanced inside, caught the white flare of a holo projection that had glitched and turned off, the shadowed silhouette of Mr. Riker sleeping on the futon. His jaw was tight, his hollow cheeks strained. His foot jerked out and kicked against the futon’s arm, making that thumping noise again.

“Mr. Riker?” Marnell said.

Mr. Riker pushed a strained sigh through his nose. His eyes opened. The tension in his body froze and faded. He sat up like every muscle ached and stared at Marnell with weary eyes.

“I can’t sleep,” Marnell said.

Mr. Riker inhaled, cut the breath off, rubbed the sleep from his eyes with the heel of his palm. He made room on the futon and dragged the blankets over his lap so Marnell could sit.

“What were you watching?” Marnell asked, glancing at the hazy holo projector.

“News,” Mr. Riker said, voice thick from sleep. He flicked the holo projector’s button and it cycled to a music program: elegant, baroque uniforms with glittery gold cuffs, string instruments humming and brass moaning, soft and slow. Mr. Riker watched with hooded eyes, the holo projection bathing his worn-out face in color.

“Can I ask you something?” Marnell said.

Mr. Riker made a humming noise. He kicked back on the futon, trying to get comfortable, but his legs shook beneath the blanket like just stretching them out strained his muscles to the breaking point.

“I saw your service record,” Marnell said, voice small. He waited for a reprimand, but Mr. Riker’s expression didn’t even flicker. “What happened to your wife?”

Mr. Riker stared at the music program. He blinked slowly, lashes lingering, casting shadows on his cheeks. “My wife?” he asked.

“It said you were married. Deanna Troi.” Marnell shifted uncomfortably. “What happened to her?”

“Nothing happened to her,” said Mr. Riker. His dazed eyes tracked the trombone player on the holo projector. “So far as I know, she’s fine. Happy.” He cleared his throat, but he didn’t go on, he just watched the musicians play.

“You said you weren’t married,” Marnell said.

“I’m not.”

“You lied.”

A muscle jumped in Mr. Riker’s cheek, making the thin scars wrinkle. “Maybe the truth was too complicated,” he said. “You’re Cardassian. You can understand a complicated truth.”

Marnell’s stomach twisted. He curled his knees up to his chest and watched the trombone player with burning eyes. Mr. Riker’s right hand twitched, his scarred fingers twisting in the blanket.

“I don’t have a wife,” said Mr. Riker. “Really, I don’t have anyone.” He cleared his throat again, his voice unemotional, matter-of-fact.

“You have Starfleet,” Marnell said.

“I fucked up in Starfleet,” said Mr. Riker. He pulled his knees up too, mirroring Marnell. “Then in the Maquis, then on Lazon II. All I have is Valdez.”

Marnell’s throat swelled. His scales flushed cold. The trombone player blurred, became a golden fuzz through the water in Marnell’s eyes.

“My dad—” he started, and his voice broke. Mr. Riker’s breathing stuttered and went still, frozen in his lungs, just like Marnell’s. “My dad’s still out there,” Marnell managed. “He did bad things. My grandpa, too.”

“Everybody does bad things,” said Mr. Riker quietly.

“Even Starfleet?”

Silence. A slow, shuddering breath. “Even Starfleet,” said Mr. Riker heavily.

Marnell swallowed. He wouldn’t cry. He waited for the coldness in his scales to settle, for his breathing to even out. “I think my dad might still be alive somewhere,” he said, staring hard at the musicians, not at Mr. Riker.

“Maybe,” said Mr. Riker. He sighed, shifted, tried to find a comfortable position for all his scars. “I hope so.”

“You hope so?”

Mr. Riker shrugged. “Don’t you?”

Marnell didn’t know what to say. Yes. No. He wanted his dad here. He wanted his grandpa alive. He wanted to eat breakfast with them. Learn to fly a shuttlecraft. Show them his grades, his gravball tricks, tell them about his fight with Jeff. But he thought of Yumelo’s earlobe, lumpy and deformed, and Mr. Riker’s shaking right hand, and the service rapier his grandpa used to kill himself, and Aza’s father parking just outside the Cardassian refugee camp.

“My dad was a guard,” Marnell said, his entire body going numb as he admitted it. “I don’t know if he was working at Lazon II. But he was a guard. He hurt people. Like you.”

Mr. Riker breathed in, slow and deep. The music program flickered, interrupted by a news strip about Gul Dor Rikk. The words ‘U.S.S. *Titan*’ flashed at the bottom of the projection. Mr. Riker dismissed it and let the music play.

“We’re not our fathers,” he said.

“But—”

The program flickered again. This time the music dissolved, replaced by a news strip that Mr. Riker didn’t try to dismiss. In Federation Standard, the newscaster reported a Bajoran uprising: this time among the officers of a Starfleet ship.

“One casualty has been reported,” he said. A familiar photo popped onto the screen: a teenage Cardassian, smiling in his cadet pips. Zurin Dakal. Mr. Riker leaned forward, his eyes sharp, as footage played out of violence on the *Titan*, officers turning on the Cardassian cadet. Blood. Phaser-fire. Beside him, Marnell had frozen, every organ in his body seizing up.

The first Cardassian to ever join Starfleet was dead.

He didn’t resist when Mr. Riker pulled him into a hug. Mr. Riker’s frame was like his mom’s: bony, ragged, every breath a labor. Marnell buried his face in Mr. Riker’s chest and tried to shut out the news strip entirely. No more words. It faded out, replaced by music, maybe real and maybe in his head. Louis Armstrong. Jazz.

A communication came through, quiet, almost drowned out by the music. A two-fingered hand rubbed a circle on Marnell’s back as Mr. Riker answered it.

“Will?” said Mr. Riker, his voice low.

And the same voice answered him, choked and filled with tears. “Tom, I—”

“I know.”

It was Starfleet that caught Yumelo, in the end. Her trial aired across the HoloNet, but Mr. Riker didn’t watch it. Neither did Marnell. They watched the USS *Titan*’s memorial service instead, where Captain William T. Riker stood by a Cardassian casket and spoke of his dead cadet in low tones, trying not to cry.

In early summer, Marnell took his first solo flight, age eleven – the same age Mr. Riker had been when he completed his. In May, they helped rebuild the refugee camp, erecting capsule shelters in the ashes of old homes.

Aza started living with her aunt. Jeff spent his weekends down in Anchorage and came back with new shoes. Judo lessons progressed, until Marnell could throw his instructor without breaking a scale. At night, when Kyle Riker came to visit, Marnell sat in the sick room with the old music disk in his hands and listened to a quiet argument. About Gul Dor Rikk. About Starfleet. About insurrections and prison camps and the ugly scar on Mr. Riker's wrist.

"I did it to protect you," Kyle said. "There's a politician on Cardassia Prime, Tom, who owes Starfleet a ton of favors thanks to me. That's the best guarantee against reprisal that you're ever going to get."

"What can they do to me," asked Mr. Riker, "that they haven't already done?"

Kyle Riker was gone the next day. On weekends, Mr. Riker joined the Cardassians, sweat streaking down his bare torso as he helped erect a new schoolhouse to replace the one that the Bajorans had destroyed. The next day, Marnell and his mother filled a bucket from the hose and scrubbed the paint off Mr. Riker's side paneling. The word "MAQUIS" disappeared bit by bit. Jeff helped, just for an hour or two. Aza stopped to watch, her eyes darting. Mr. Riker worked a rag into the paneling until his bad hand cramped and his fingers were red and raw.

In the afternoons, sticky from the heat, Marnell sat at Mr. Riker's table, lemonade sweating in a glass at his elbow, and studied orbital mechanics until he had the equations memorized by heart. Mr. Riker sat across from him, a pair of glasses framing his strained eyes. He palmed a nutrient capsule into his mouth – a painkiller next – and washed it down with water, all without taking his eyes off Marnell's study plan.

"Do you still want to be in Starfleet?" Mr. Riker asked idly.

Marnell stared at the equations until they scrambled, became hieroglyphics in his mind. He sat back, thought of Cadet Dakal, of his grandpa, of Aza.

"Kind of," he said. Mr. Riker studied him. "Not really. I don't know."

"What do you want to do, then?" Riker asked, folding his arms on the table. Marnell chewed his stylus, staring down at the PADD. He traced the equations. On the other side of town, in a Cardassian schoolhouse, a refugee was stumbling through the basics of Federation Standard, trying to wean her students from the universal translators they all shared.

"Stay here, I guess," Marnell said.

"Here? In Valdez?"

Marnell shrugged. He stared out the window, toward the forest – toward Curtis Creek. "I like it here."

"What would you do?" Mr. Riker asked. "There aren't many opportunities for Starfleet officers in Valdez. I would know. We mostly end up here to die – or care for loved ones – or rest." He indicated himself with a wry smile, humorless, hyper-cognizant of his scars. Those scars were all Marnell could think about.

"I would become a teacher," he said.

He sneaked a glance at Mr. Riker, then, and watched his politely curious expression break.

"A teacher..." Mr. Riker said softly.

"Is that okay?" asked Marnell. "It's not ... under-achieving?"

Mr. Riker's face was frozen. He swallowed once – twice – managed to look away.

"Is it?" Marnell asked.

When Mr. Riker spoke, his voice was raspy. "Maybe," he said. He managed a shrug, quick and jerky, and the two fingers remaining on his right hand trembled against the countertop. He dragged Marnell's PADD toward him and eyed the equations without seeing them. "But the galaxy could use a few under-achievers, don't you think?"

Marnell agreed.

He moved back into the refugee camp by early July. The capsule shelter was cleaner than the house he'd left behind. Sturdier. The children in the Cardassian schoolhouse had forgotten Marnell's name, but they knew him from the gossip around town: he was the kid who went to Valdez Elementary with the Humans and Bajorans.

He was the kid who knew how to fly.

End Notes

The title comes from Challenger astronaut and public school teacher Christa McAuliffe: "I touch the future. I teach."

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