Ascent I (Part One)

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Summary

When Lore is reassembled by Dr. Bruce Maddox, he awakes to a world he is unprepared for: A world or regret. With his ethical program repaired, Lore must face the guilt and reality of his crimes, but some don't want his guilt. They want retribution. He finds a lone friend aboard the Enterprise, but will his past destroy her and his new life? Or will the Enterprise and her crew pay?

Notes

The events of Ascent I take place immediately after the events of Star Trek: Insurrection. This places it roughly 2 years before the events of Star Trek: Nemesis. While I try to "remind" readers of events from the series, I think reading will go much smoother if you're already familiar with the TNG episodes: "DataLore", "Measure of a Man", "Brothers", and "Descent 1 & 2".

This story was originally posted on FanFiction.net in 2012 and was my very first fanfic (you'll probably be able to tell, lol). =)

PS: All comments about grammar/spelling mistakes will be deleted immediately. Get a life. I wrote this for fun. I'm not a professional author doing 15 rereads with hired betas to produce an end product that will be purchased. You're reading this for free. Also, if your primary takeaway after reading a 160K word book is to whine about grammar errors, please consider that your approach to literature is heavily flawed.
Chapter 1

Chapter One

“Years…Eight years….”

“The replicator hummed gently and produced the beverage with a soft glimmer of particles. Doctor Bruce Maddox carried the tea gingerly in one hand while clutching a small pile of data pads in the other. Normally he would have created his favorite drink himself, using the scared and ancient kettle he had inherited from his grandmother. But there was no time for luxuries such as home made tea. Today was hectic—and destined to become more so.

Dropping the data pads with a clatter on the counter, he sipped the precisely heated tea and surveyed the lab floor from behind the glass partition. The main lab of the robotics division had never been as large as he would have liked, in spite of recent upgrades. The Daystrom Institute gave him and his staff access to every technological resource to be sure, but it just felt so pathetically small for the importance of it all.

After this, they'll have to give me stellar cartography's space.

He smiled as he imagined a room the size of a shuttle bay, everything focused on one small table in the center…

“We’re just about ready in here, Captain.”

Maddox glowered at the young ensign only briefly.

“I’m sorry. Doctor.” The young man corrected quickly. “But everything is set up, we’re ready.”

“All right.” Maddox drained the tea in one shot and took an unsteady breath. He had been pleased with his promotion, certainly, but what did it matter to him? Captain. It was a title for starships, for commanders, men who made decisions but who created nothing. No, he preferred Doctor.

He ordered the lab lights lowered a bit. Seeing every blip and minute flutter of the screen was absolutely essential. He could not allow a potentially once in a life time opportunity to be destroyed because of glare on a monitor. As he ran that through his head – once in a life time – the reality began to sink in. It seemed his entire career had been waiting for this moment, a moment which could have occurred years ago, but…

He suddenly regretted the tea. His nerves didn’t need it.

“All right, people.” He waited until every tech in the room was looking at him. It took a few moments, considering what else there was to look at. “I’ve been telling you for weeks how important this is, so I shouldn’t have to say more.” His voice was even, betraying nothing.

One of the techs nodded and took a step back from the table. The force field restraints sizzled
once before becoming invisible. “Restraints are in place.” He reported before returning his eyes quickly back to the same spot that had occupied them prior to Maddox’s entrance. Several of the other techs continued to shoot glances over their shoulders.

“Pay attention to your stations.” Maddox ordered. “No mistakes.”

Maddox rolled his eyes as he began to work minutely at the head of the table. Even the restraints were a useless precaution in his opinion, so the anxiety around him seemed doubly unnecessary. What did they think was going to happen? His objections had been for not, though. The board of directors had been explicit and Starfleet command had backed them up with an ultimatum: Full restraints and a security detail, or the experiment was a no-go. He shrugged. If something did happen, the force field probably would not help for very long anyway. It was not as if he wouldn’t find a way out.

Maddox used a thin tool to hold the hair away as he flipped open the upper cranial plate and slowly lowered it down. He still never got used to the look of it all. Not the circuitry or humanoid shape, as some of his colleagues did, but rather the artificiality. Try as he might, sorting through journals, correspondence, every nook and cranny of Noonien Soong’s work, he just couldn’t understand why that genius would make an android with yellow eyes and gold-white skin. When every possible avenue for realistic imitation had been open to him, why did he choose such a purposely flawed impression?

At the moment it didn’t matter, nothing mattered but success. He finished connecting the positronic uplink and returned to the glow of the console. Nothing. The positronic brain was totally inactive.

So far, so good.

He saw the wary glances of the techs. Maybe a little fun would ease his nerves, which really were a bit raw. He approached the table again and reached underneath to the hole that had been specifically designed for this purpose. “All right, people, hold on.”

He smiled to himself as he saw one of the young ensigns grab the stair railing, ready to make a run for it.

Maddox pressed hard into the precise spot at the lower back. The switch was misleading; no click or noticeable suppression, but the whole body shook and the eyelids fluttered for a moment. Stillness followed and the ensign let go of the railing. The open cranial section, previously dark, now housed a single pin point of red light. Maddox moved quickly back to the console, “Begin the transfer.”

It was hardly the stuff of action packed hollow-novels, but Maddox was in his element. He had performed this in simulation twenty-three times and had twenty-one successes to show for it. Not a bad margin considering that no one’s life was in danger if he failed. The positronic brain he had built, that he had spent seven years building, was handling the transfer with steady, if assisted grace. When a pathway became too unstable, he compensated quickly or redirected. When damaged data entered the stream, he would discard it.

So much damaged data....

When the transfer was sixty percent complete, his nerves finally began to settle. The techs were still shooting glances at the table, but with a bit less anxiety now. Everything was going according to plan. As the final data stream was transferred, there was a heavy pause. Maddox watched the monitor, waiting for his stable positronic brain to fail. It did not happen, and he exhaled as if he had
been holding his breath for the whole hour. The lab hummed with congratulations and mixed conversation. He had a successful positronic brain. That was everything, the only thing on which everything hinged. Everything else was spackle and paint.

“Captain.”

The anxiety in the voice made Maddox forget the slip as he followed the tech’s gaze to the table. Everything was still and in place, just as it had been. For the few seconds it took him to realize the cause of the summons, he was a bit irritated. Then he saw it.

The solitary red light in the front cranial section had been joined by a cluster of others, several of which blinked steadily. Maddox stepped out from behind the console, moving forward slowly. He knew each light for what it was, knew them like a cook knows a stove. The three green lights to the right of the steady red one indicated hearing. They were blinking. The double blue lights below that indicated sight. They were not blinking, but they were there. Maddox was now closer to the table than anyone else. As he watched, two more lights activated. Touch.

“Ensign, disable the transfer uplink.” He kept his voice calm. After all, it was just a glitch; a meaningless glitch.

“Uplink deact—this can’t be right.”

“What!” Maddox had no time to keep calm now.

“Sir, the transfer…” The tech’s brow was knitted in worry, “It’s being reversed. Down to seventy percent!”

“What are you talking about? That’s impossible!” Maddox all but shoved the man out of the way as his hand flew over the controls. His head shook unconsciously. This didn’t make any sense.

“Thirty percent.” The tech continued from behind. A moment later, the consol sounded an unhappy note. “Sir, the transfer’s been…reversed. Zero percent.”

Maddox couldn’t reply, he couldn’t even think. He leaned on the console, his arms bracing. How could this happen? There was no indication?

“Ensign,” He almost whispered, “Set up a new line of analysis and start following the path of the destabilization. We need to find out where the collapse started—.”

“Sir, there was no collapse.” One of the other techs’ voices rang out from across the room. “The positronic brain is still stable. Awaiting transfer.”

“That’s impossible.” He said to no one.

“Doctor, I’m…” The ensign shook his head, reluctant, “I’m reading processing activity in the positronic brain.”

“Processing of what? The transfer failed!” He snapped.

“No, Sir, not that one. The other one.” He nodded his head toward the table.

“That’s ridiculous!” In two long strides, Maddox reached the table and pulled the hard line link-up from the cranial connection. The head jerked back and Maddox shuddered. He had never been so careless with it before.
Maddox would have serious trouble explaining just what happened next, as it all happened so quickly. Every indicator light in the exposed cranium activated in a flutter of blinks. The left hand shot upward, causing the force field the shudder violently under the assault. Two of the techs ran for the door and even Maddox leapt backward. He nearly fell over backwards as he rammed his lower back into the console. He stared, confounded, as the left hand continued to graze its' fingers along the force field, making it hum. The head rolled a bit from side to side.

“Where…time?” The voice was stilted, clipped, like a recording being cut short. It continued, “Years…eight years…happened?”

Bruce Maddox slammed his hand down on the console so hard, he was sure he had broken it, “Security to main lab! Security!”

His experiment had been a complete success.
Chapter 2

Chapter Two

“…no one ever asks Captain Picard if his hair grows.”

The state of engineering was beginning to wear on Geordie LaForge’s nerves. Even in the first couple of months with the Enterprise E, when all the ‘bugs’ had still to be worked out, it had not been as bad as this. Starfleet’s newest flag ship had taken a hard beating in its first few years, and she had the scars to prove it.

“Micro-fractures in the dilithium chamber!” he grumbled, “On a ship not five years old!”

“The Enterprise warp core has sustained stress well above the average of similarly aged vessels.” Data handed Geordie the next tool that he would need.

“Thanks, Data.” Geordie sighed and took the tool.

Data, in spite of his especially even tone, also had to admit that the maintenance status was becoming…unappealing. Of course, his objections were not dominated by the same concerns as the others. He did not tire, and so had no complaints for lack of sleep. He did not require food or drink, both of which were the topics of many grumbled conversations lately. Humans hated to be rushed through meals. He did not even claim boredom as a primary objection. How could he when the work dynamic of the crew was so fascinating? No, his objections were much simpler. The crew was unhappy, and Data did not like to see his friends unhappy. He had also spent so little time with Spot.

“After this, I’m going to get down to deck three and replace that faulty power relay.” Geordie’s voice echoed from his position under the console. He was lying on his back with only his legs visible outside. “That shouldn’t take more than an hour.”

“I have already replaced that relay. It took thirty-three minutes.” Data stood up now as Geordie began to push his tools out of the small space.

“Already done? When?”

“I finished it at oh-three hundred hours.”

There was a soft chuckle from inside the console. “You know, Data, if there were two of you around, we would have been done days ago.”

“I’m afraid that is not accurate, Geordie. Ships records show that all scheduled maintenance and upgrades will not be complete for ninety seven days at the current rate. Were I able to perform twice as many repairs, completion would still not--”

“A compliment, Data.” Geordie interrupted quickly. “Maybe a bit exaggerated, but still a compliment.”
“I see. Thank you, Geordie.” Data nodded as if just understanding, but Geordie had not seen the abashed smile that had lighted his face. After the successful activation of his emotion chip five years ago, he had found that reacting well to praise was exceptionally difficult for him. Logically, he could not explain why he should have such a reaction. Surely, if his engineering abilities could be doubled, it would be a benefit to the ship. Why then should he feel so reluctant to acknowledge the fact?

“How long have your been on duty, Data?”

Data turned now to Councilor Troi as she came around to the back ops station. She picked up a few scattered tools from the floor to give Geordie some room.

“Starfleet regulations state that I may be on duty for no more than ten consecutive hours, except under red alert.” His reply was quick and simple, but hardly able to fool Diana Troi.

“Come on, Data.” Geordie chided with a smile. “When was the last time you took a break?”

“As you just pointed out, Geordie, it is to the benefit of the ship that I am able---.”

“Data.” Troi crossed her arms in a mock show of disapproval.

Data sighed; another of the occasionally unconscious reactions to the emotion chip. “Ninety-three hours.”

Troi put a hand on Data’s arm. “Go to Ten-Forward, or the hollow deck. Take a few hours off.”

Although Data still did not see the necessity of their concern, he knew that further arguments were futile. He smiled slightly, a new idea striking him. “Is that an order, Councilor?”

Troi blinked in surprise, and then smiled. “Yes, Data, it is. As ship’s councilor.”

“Then it is unfortunate that I out-rank you.” The smile was still on his face, although he was attempting to cover it for the sake of appearing serious.

“Nice try, Data. Go to Ten Forward.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

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Ten-Forward was rather busy considering the frightening number of delinquent repairs across the ship. Unfortunately, the continuing problems with the Dominion had left many ships undermanned, especially in engineering, and there were not very many qualified crewman to complete the repairs.

Data paused to allow a crewman carrying a tray of drinks to cross the crowded room. The man smiled and glanced back several times as he continued walking. Data noticed, as he always did. A ship as large and as sought after as the Enterprise saw an almost continuous crew rotation, and so there was always a significant portion of the crew that seemed unable to ignore his presence. It was not everyone, or even every member of Starfleet, who got to see the only sentient android in existence.
It had bothered him at first, especially in the first few months of having his emotion chip. The surreptitious stares of strangers and crewman alike had been difficult to ignore, and at times even difficult to tolerate. But it had been years now, and he had mostly come to accept the inevitability of it, although like all emotional beings, his reactions were not always consistent. Today, it bothered him.

Guinan, who never missed anything that happened in her dominion of Ten-Forward, appeared at Data’s side. The mysterious bartender’s El-Aurian intuition needed no hint from Data’s gentle expression of irritation, but it didn’t hurt.

“My father once said to me,” Guinan began in her usual mellow tone, “‘there are only two reasons for someone to stare at you. Either they think you’ve done something, or they think that you will.’”

Data’s eyes darted quickly down to Guinan’s height. That was hardly what he had expected her to say, and it most certainly did not make him feel better.

“You believe that crewman Walters thinks that I will do something?” Although he could not guess what that something might be, he immediately concluded that it was not something good.

Guinan smiled and shook her head, “No, Data. Crewman Walters does not think that you will do something. He knows that you have done things.”

Data closed his eyes and shook his head again, “I do not understand what you mean.”

Guinan took Data’s arm and led him toward the bar. This was one among the many reasons that Data liked Guinan and considered her a good friend. She treated him the same as her other friends, but without pretended he was human. The last was an abysmal reaction that some misguided ensigns preferred. Guinan produced a bottle of bluish grey liquid from beneath the bar and began pouring it out into two glasses.

“Isn’t it possible, Data, that some of the crew might react to you the way that they do not because of what you are, but because of who you are?” She handed Data the rather ominous looking glass and waited politely.

Data hesitated a moment, considering the murky drink while also analyzing Guinan’s words. Was she referring to his position as second officer? Was that who he was? The murky drink was far more pleasant than it had appeared, and he pushed the empty glass toward her.

Guinan began to pour again, “You’re a highly decorated officer, Data. You’ve saved this ship and the people on it more times than I can count. And people know that.”

He understood now, although he was not sure that he agreed. It was in Guinan’s nature to make others more at ease, yet it was not in her nature to mislead in order to do it.

“The crew does not react that way to Captain Picard.” He pointed out quickly, feeling that the comparison was one Guinan would accept. It was not meant as an outright challenge, but a statement of fact. New crewman did not stare at Captain Picard, nor did they ask to shake his hand just to see what it felt like, although it was strictly guests and never crew that were guilty of that.

Data scowled slightly as he spoke, “And no one ever asks Captain Picard if his hair grows.”

Guinan’s hand came to her face to stifle the rocking laugh that escaped her. Several of the surrounding patrons turned at the sound, amused. Data was rather surprised, but smiled anyway. Commander Riker said that laughter was contagious.
“Did I say something funny?”

“No, Data.” She wiped at her eyes, “You said the funniest thing I have heard in a long time. But do yourself a favor and don’t pass that one along to the Captain.”

Just as Data was considering her warning, his combadge chirped.

“Worf to Commander Data.”

“Data here.”

“Commander, we’re receiving a priority one message via subspace.”

“Has Captain Picard been informed?” He nodded to Guinan as he rose to make his exit.

“No, Sir. The message is for you personally.”

Data paused in surprise. He did not receive subspace messages. Every friend he had was onboard the Enterprise. Data glanced at Guinan again as he approached the exit. She was looking out toward the stars, a concerned expression on her face.

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Geordie was just closing up the console when Data stepped off the turbo-lift and moved directly to the standing ops station.

“Did you at least make it to Ten-Forward?” Geordie asked.

“Yes. I told Guinan a joke.” He volunteered, pleased.

“And?” Geordie waited. He was used to Data’s active attempts at humor.

“She said it was the funniest thing she had heard in a long time. Although, I am not supposed to tell Captain Picard.”

Geordie exchanged a glance with Troi, “Now I know it must have been funny.”

Data moved his fingers over the console with his usual fluttering grace, his expression still mildly bright. He pressed the necessary controls and read the four-thousand word message in a fraction of a second. His reactions were much slower to catch up. Geordie glanced once in Data’s direction just in time to see his friend’s smile fade, his posture shift forward, and a deep scowl etch itself across his face. His hands fell quickly from the console, almost as if he were pushing it away in disgust.

“Data?” Troi’s voice was more anxious than Geordie’s expression, for she could sense what Geordie could not see.

Data actually took a single step back from the console, as if it were contaminated. This was not the reaction of a logical android. Troi had never seen emotion manifest itself so physically in Data before.

“Data, what’s going on?” Geordie took a step forward.

Data looked up, his face torn and angry. “Lore. He is…alive.”
Bruce Maddox had never been more thankful for procrastination as he was at that moment. The excitement and furious repairs had taken up virtually his every waking thought, which was considerable since he had not slept in almost thirty-six hours. Of course, that was after the crippling fear and panic had worn off. That had taken a while.

Now, as he sat at his desk reading the reply message and gulping down strong coffee, he was thankful that it had taken him nearly a week to contact Data with the news. The reply message was very short and rather—in Maddox’s opinion—emotional.

Lore poses a security threat that cannot be contained while he is conscious. It is my recommendation that he be deactivated and disassembled immediately. His history proves that he cannot be trusted and will use every means at his disposal to escape...

Even more than the procrastination, he was thankful that he had neglected to mention the repairs that he had been conducted for the past five days. Having the new positronic brain as a virtually identical, yet undamaged, copy of Lore’s had made finding the damage almost elementary. Repairing the damage that Data had inflicted—rightly, he reminded himself—on Lore’s systems had been nothing compared to what now occupied his thoughts, his days, and the left side of his cluttered desk.

One last time, for the possibly hundredth time, he compared the repaired positronic brain to the only other one like it in the universe. Schematics littered the screens and data pads that surrounded him. This could be done, he was sure. But what would it accomplish? Would it even make a noticeable difference in its—Lore’s behavior? That would be the most fascinating part; waiting, watching, analyzing. It was all fascinating, although he had never considered himself a psychologist.

In addition to the schematics were thousands of words of reports and logs, everything that bore an official reference to Lore and his…activities. He had everything from the journals of the Omicron Theta colonists to the official incident reports of the Enterprise senior staff. At first he had been reluctant to read the accounts of Picard and his crew. He remembered his initial reaction in the lab, and how he had forced himself to get his mind in order before the security guards could destroy everything. He didn’t want anything like emotional testimony to dissuade him.
Dr. Crusher’s account of her encounter with Lore had been one of the most difficult to read. It had taken three separate treatments to repair the painful burns to her forearm…

He dropped that thought from his mind and picked up the data pad containing Picard’s official report. He sifted through it, stopping when he saw Lore’s words, quoted for the record by Picard:

“The reign of biological life forms is coming to an end. You and those like you are obsolete…”

He quickly tossed the pad aside and continued reading Data’s reply message. He actually hadn’t finished it, in spite of its brevity and the fact that it had been on his desk for three days. It had begun with exactly what he had expected. Data’s log entries referring to Lore were nothing if not consistent. In fact, and Maddox himself could not believe he was thinking this, the entries were even a bit stubborn. Maddox had been reading Data’s logs for nearly ten years. It was part of their ongoing academic affiliation that Data gave Maddox full access to his logs and reports. By this, he was sure he had come to know Data rather well.

Data had a thoughtful, contemplative nature, almost to the point of being mentally verbose. Maddox would never forget one log entry in particular in which Data puzzled for nearly ten minutes over the mystery of knock-knock jokes. The vast majority of humans balked at them as childish, and yet most still laughed at them genuinely. Lore was another matter. When it came to Lore, there was no contemplation, no questions, only conclusions. According to Data, Lore should not, must not exist.

Data would be an obstacle to his plans. That much was clear, and he had not adequately figured out what he was going to do about that. There were too many reasons for others to be against this, and what possible justification could he give for wanting to repair Lore? Was there any justification that could compete with everything it—he—had done? Maddox scoffed. Of course there was! No one would put down a unicorn for scratching a few people.

“Brown to Dr. Maddox.”

“Yes?”

“Doctor, I was told to inform you that Lieutenant Commander Data just entered the building.”

Maddox did not bother to respond, but flew out of his chair and into the corridor. This was actually something he had not expected. The Federation flagship, for crying out loud! Would Picard really have diverted it back to Earth for the sake of the personal events of one crewmember? As he remembered Picard’s report, and the genocidal words of Lore, he knew the answer. He most certainly would.

Maddox emerged into the main reception area, the ensign behind the desk already giving him an anxious and guilty expression.

“Well? Where is he?” He hissed across the room.

“The main lab, sir…”

Maddox practically growled and threw himself across the room in the direction of the lab. He could hear the pleading apology behind him. “I’m sorry, Doctor. He has full clearance…”
It took much of his effort to slow a few yards from the lab and catch his breath. It wouldn’t be good to be seen flustered like some guilty criminal. Although, he knew that wouldn’t be much cover. Data could hear a heartbeat from across a room.

Data was standing at the counter in front of the observation window, looking into the lab. His friend, LaForge, was with him, standing against the counter. His sapphire blue optical implants surveyed the lab with a hard expression. Occasionally, he glanced at his friend to gauge his reaction.

Lore was no longer lying on the lab table as before. He stood vertically in a secured containment unit, visible only from the chest up. His eyes were closed, unconscious. Maddox had seen to that. He stepped into the room and immediately moved to the counter where he had left a messy pile of data pads. He refused to stand still and be interrogated as he rearranged the pads and began putting them away.

“What happened?” Data tone was anxious.

Maddox started. Data was impeccably polite. It wasn’t like him to skip hellos.

“I haven’t quite figured that out yet.” The words were like acid in his mouth. “The transfer couldn’t have done this. The reversal of the transfer is just too perfect to be a glitch. I have to assume that even the small amount of power we used for the transfer must have been enough to activate some kind of failsafe system that Lore had installed himself…in case he was deactivated.”

Data’s face was blank, “That is why it was recommended that he never be reassembled.”

Maddox bristled, “You know as well as I that for a neural net transfer to occur, there has to be full assembly. It’s not all in the head, you know.”

Data closed his eyes, shaking his head, “I was not aware that you were planning to use Lore for an experimental transfer.”

Maddox brushed the comment aside with a wave of his hand. “What’s really important now is where we go from here. I’ve repaired most of the pathway damage that he…sustained, but that’s just the first step toward—.”

“You do not plan to disassemble him.” Data’s tone was accusatory now.

Maddox inhaled deeply, “Data, I don’t think you understand what I’m suggesting here. I can complete the repairs that Dr. Soong didn’t. He knew where he had gone wrong. It’s all in his journals—.”

“Lore is dangerous, Doctor. He cannot be allowed to be reactivated.”

“Do you believe that nothing can be done to change that?” Maddox regretted the question immediately. He already knew the answer.

“I do not believe he can be changed, Doctor. Lore was not, nor am I, merely the sum of his programming. Lore gave reasons for his behavior that he believed justified him. He believed that it was his calling to lead the Borg to destroy humanity. Those reasons would still be there if he were reactivated.”

Maddox paused, a bit overwhelmed by the hard anguish in Data’s expression. While they maintained regular correspondence, he had not seen Data in years. Maddox, for some illogical reason, had always imagined Data as a permanent fixture, unchanging. But, Dr. Soong had been
thorough about many things including an aging program, and Data had indeed aged in the twelve years since their last encounter. Lore, rather noticeably, had not.

“I plan to proceed with the repairs to Lore’s ethical sub-routine and emotional programming, Commander.”

La Forge took a step forward now, “Doctor, there’s no way to know if repairs to the ethical sub-routine will make any difference here. And even if it did... Lore has committed serious crimes.”

“No, Mr. La Forge, there is a way to tell, and that is exactly what I plan to do. And as to his crimes... I’m sure a Federation court will be involved.”

“Doctor, I understand your academic curiosity, but I cannot consent to Lore’s reactivation.” There was a finality in his tone that would have angered Maddox had it not been so shocking.

“Commander Data,” He hesitated, “I think that you will find that there is no law allowing you to interfere in this.”

Data’s expression fell. There was no anger, only shock. “Doctor, I am begging you to reconsider. He is dangerous.”

Maddox sighed and looked away for a moment. He knew that Data was not trying to be difficult, that he believed in his warnings. But he couldn’t ignore the implications of heeding Data’s advice.

Such a waste!

“I plan to carry out the procedure in two days. I encourage you to wait for the results.”

Data’s expression was unreadable.

“I’m surprised you woke me. Why didn’t you just take me apart and be done with it?” Lore’s eyes were narrowed as he glared at his creator, his father, Noonien Soong. “That is why the two of you captured me?”

Dr. Soong assured Lore that I had had nothing to do with this, that he had not been captured on purpose. Neither of us had expected to see Lore ever again.

Dr. Soong tried to convince him, “Until you walked through that door, I had no idea you had ever been reassembled.”

Lore cringed in disgust, “No thanks to you.” He turned his head sharply to glare at me. “But thanks to you, dear brother, I spent nearly two years drifting through space. If it hadn’t been for a fortunate encounter with a Pakled trade ship, I’d still be out there.”

“I had no alternative. You would have destroyed the Enterprise.”

Data remembered the disgusted smile that had crossed Lore’s lips in those moments. He ran the
memory through his mind in real time. Geordie had once told him that humans often did this when they wished to relive pleasant memories. This was not a pleasant memory, but if he could glean some new perspective on the events, he would try.

Nothing about the memory was any more real that it had been when it occurred. There was nothing he noticed or remembered that had not always been present. Only his reactions were now different. He was angry.

“And if Maddox is successful?” Guinan sipped at her ruby red beverage, gazing thoughtfully into the glass.

“That depends.” It was Geordie that responded, “What’s our definition of success here? If we’re talking about completing the repairs, getting Lore’s ethical sub-routines to function like Data’s, I think that’s a given.”

“But what’s your definition of success?”

Geordie sighed, “Success? Maybe if Lore would…I don’t know…”

“Become a good person?” Guinan supplied, her voice only slightly skeptical.

Geordie laughed humorlessly, “Yeah, I guess that would be a definition.”

“I find that outcome to be unlikely.” Data did not look at his friends as he spoke, his eyes on the table.

Guinan set her glass on the table gently, “As I’ve come to understand it, the difference between having an ‘ethical sub-routine’ and not can be…extreme.”

Geordie looked quickly at her, sighing. “Guinan…”

“That is true.” Data admitted, “The injuries that I inflicted on you, Geordie, were much a result of my ethical sub-routine being deactivated.”

“Now wait a second,” Geordie sat up, “It wasn’t just that. He was manipulated you with emotions. Lore never had that excuse.”

Data attempted a smile that fell quickly. It had been a very long time since either of them had mentioned the violence that he had committed while he was with Lore. He had come very close to killing his best friend. Geordie had forgiven him, but he never did forgive himself.

Guinan leaned in, “But if your behavior could be so different without this sub-routine, wouldn’t it follow that Lore’s would be very different with it?”

“It would most certainly be a helpful measure, but the ethical sub-routine only gives me the ability to understand the difference between right and wrong, it does not dictate which I choose. Humans often choose paths that they know to be morally wrong because some other motivation dominates them.”

Guinan nodded and sipped her drink.

Geordie continued, “Okay. So Maddox completes the repairs. What then?”

“He will have to stand trial for his crimes.” Data said matter-of-factly.

Guinan nodded again, “How else could Maddox justify keeping him?”
Data cocked his head to the side, “Do you mean to say that Doctor Maddox will have to see Lore convicted in order to continue his research?”

Guinan locked eyes with Data now, serious. “Of course he will. As I understand it, Starfleet and the Federation don’t usually imprison people who haven’t been found guilty of a crime.”

“But that also would not be to Doctor Maddox’s advantage. His desire to complete Lore’s repairs indicates that he wishes Lore to be conscious for the sake of observation. Were Lore to be lawfully convicted, would that not interfere with that goal?”

Guinan and Geordie exchanged an anxious glance before Guinan continued, “Data, there is no reason to believe that Lore’s…sentence…would include disassembly. He would be incarcerated in a Federation prison like any human criminal.”

Data’s face fell, “He would escape.”

“I’m sure he would try.”

“He would succeed.”

Guinan paused, “I don’t see any other possible outcome. Sentencing is dictated by law. Not even Gul Dukat was put into a coma.” There was silence again as Data diverted his eyes to a point outside the window.

Guiana slowly rose from the table. “I just can’t wait to hear about his defense. If any.” She moved across Ten-Forward to join a few other patrons.

The idea of incarceration, while legally sound, just did not work. Data remembered when Lore had been reassembled, how easy it had been for him to use the Enterprise to contact the Crystalline entity. He had been integral in Lore’s plan, for it was Data that Lore had impersonated in order to move about the ship. That was not possible now, not with the marked difference in their appearances due to Lore being physically almost a decade younger. But had Lore been alone, had Data not been there to be an avenue for Lore’s deceit, there would have been no doubt that Lore would have taken control of the ship.

Data knew only too well how easy it would be for him to take complete control of the Enterprise in a matter of minutes. He himself had done just that when Dr. Soong had activated a latent homing device which led him to the remote planet where Dr. Soong lived…and had died. If Data could so easily take the Federation flagship, what was to keep Lore from escaping—eventually—even the most secure brig?
The grey room hummed with muted voices, each of which Data could easily discern. It was not his usual habit to eavesdrop. In fact, he often reduced the effective range of his hearing to give his fellow crewman the privacy they assumed they had. Now it seemed his curiosity and anxiety had overridden his usual way of doing things.

Admiral Thoren and Commander Marsh were discussing the legal scenarios surrounding the new developments.

“Supposing that Omicron Theta can be included in Federation territory, the complete lack of witnesses would cause a rather substantial hurdle for the prosecution.”

Admiral Thoren nodded, “That is so. However, his dealings with the crystalline entity while aboard the Enterprise, to which there are many witnesses, would lend substantial weight to the charge.”

“Still, if the crystalline entity is classified as a sentient life-form, we’re still only dealing with accessory charges…”

Data turned his attention away when he heard his name from another corner.

“…and I’m telling you, Commander Data carries too much weight with Starfleet command. They’ll listen to him. After all, he ought to know!”

A young security officer whom Data had never met scoffed at his colleague, “I’ve been around Captain Maddox. Trust me. If he wants that thing walking and talking and being analyzed, he’ll get it.”

That thing. Data turned from the conversation as quickly as he had caught it. He never forgot that some were not as willing as his colleagues aboard the Enterprise to see past what he was. He could never forget anything, but it was sometimes easy to allow things to drift to the back of his consciousness. It should have been some consolation that the comment had referred to Lore and not him, but somehow it was no consolation at all.

Captain Picard crossed the short space to greet Admiral Thoren, an old friend. The greeting was solemn in appearance owing to the situation. Data immediately reduced his hearing range and turned his attention back to the room as a whole. The ante-chamber to the main lab was a space too small for so many people. Captain Picard was present with Councilor Troi. The rest of the assembly, Data could only assume, had been gathered by Doctor Maddox. Admiral Thoren, the once JAG officer for sector 001, and now Federation high court judge, gave credit to Guinan’s warning. If Maddox indeed intended to have Lore sentenced to imprisonment, it would make sense for him to begin the legal proceedings as soon as possible.
At the rear of the room, flanking both sides of the door, were two security guards with phaser rifles.

Captain Maddox entered the room, causing the hushed conversations to cease. He moved directly to the window facing the lab and stood next to Data. “No one will have to be in the room.” He said, speaking directly to Data, “He will…awaken…immediately after all the repaired systems come online. It should be any moment.”

There was silence in the room as all looked toward the lab. Maddox glanced at Data and smiled. “Data,” Maddox spoke with a low voice, “I respect your reservations, and I hope you know that neither I nor any of my staff would be so careless as to allow Lore to pose a real threat to anyone.”

Data’s jaw locked, trapping his initial thought. Finally, “Doctor, I do not believe that Lore will require you to allow him to do anything.”

Maddox turned his hard gaze into the lab. There was not the slightest sound in the room, and Data could hear every anxious heartbeat.

There was no single expectation of what would happen, but Lore opened his eyes so slowly and without movement that it was several seconds before the humans realized that it had happened. Lore lay motionless on the lab table, his arms loosely at his sides. The collection of dark grey clothing in which he had been placed made him blend with the dark gun-metal of the room. His eyes shifted curiously before he slowly lifted his head and shoulders. He sat up slowly, his head hanging down as if deep in thought. His eyes closed tightly, opening to glance about the room, and clenching shut again. He had not sprung up from the bed or started shouting, or any other possible course of drama which the small audience might have imagined. Yet, as his expression slowly contorted from one of confusion to one of anguish, a palpable wave of surprise swept the room.

Lore shook his head slowly, bringing his legs over the edge of the table and turning his back on the group. He had not so much as glanced in their direction, and Data wondered for a moment if Lore was yet aware of them.

Slowly, and with a confidence that answered Data’s question, Lore turned his eyes toward them. His hard expression was tinged, and when he finally came to Data, he closed his eyes and shook his head with a bitter, inaudible laugh. “Leave me alone.”

Data’s departure was so sudden that no one saw the horror on his face.

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In the wide corridor outside the main lab, Maddox shook hands with Admiral Thoren and Commander Marsh, wishing them farewell. Admiral Thoren, as suited his Vulcan nature, made no assumption about anything they had seen, for they had seen relatively little.

“There will be nothing for my official report until he speaks.”

“Of course, of course,” Maddox replied quickly, “This was never going to be a quickly resolved situation.”
“Of course.” Thoren nodded and left with Commander Marsh. Maddox turned, alone now, to face the remainder of the ensemble.

Captain Picard stood with Geordie now while Councilor Troi stood apart. Her arms were folded across her chest, one hand holding her forehead. As usual, Picard did not have to ask the question, but only looked toward her.

She shook her head in frustration, “I’m sorry, Captain. I can’t place anything certain in Lore’s reaction. The emotions are changing directions so rapidly that I can’t tell where he’s going.”

Maddox’s eyes darted, “Is something wrong with him?”

Troi gave Maddox a curiously irritated expression, “No, that is not it. There is a great deal of confusion in him.”

“Surely he’s figured out what has happened.”

“His confusion has nothing to do with what happened to him or how he got here.” She replied.

“Then what?” Said Picard.

Looking to the lab door as if she could see through it, Troi frowned in frustration. “I’m not sure. His emotions are…elsewhere, concerning other things. He’s not really concerned with us or what we plan to do with him.”

Picard shook his head, “I find that hard to believe.”

Troi turned now to see Data approaching them from the end of the corridor. “Data.”

“I would like to apologize, Captain. I should not have---.”

“Data,” Picard interrupted, placing a hand on his shoulder, “I would like to say that I understand what you’re going through, but I don’t think it would be true. In any case, you have no need to apologize for anything.”

“Thank you, sir.” He turned to Maddox, “I would like to speak to Lore now.”

Maddox nodded, saying nothing. What could he have to say?

Geordie smiled at his friend, “We’ll be waiting.”

“No, Geordie. I would like all of you to accompany me.” He paused, “Please.”

The assembly entered the grey lab. With a commanding nod, Picard sent the two security guards outside.

Lore had moved away from the lab table and to the rear of the small room. Upon the raised second level at the back, he sat on the floor, his back against the wall. With one knee bent up and his head resting back against the wall. The pose was so commonly human, so out of place. His face was turned upward and his eyes closed.

More than a minute passed as Data stood still, silent. Finally, and with no movement but for his lips, Lore spoke, “I have nothing to say to you, Data.”

Data’s face hardened, “Nothing at all?”
Lore sighed and opened his eyes, “What would you have me say, dear brother? I don’t have any stories to tell.”

“Do you know where you are? What has happened?” Data’s tone was professional, detachment.

“Mmm….What happened, what happened…” Lore’s voice was a whisper, “Well, last time I woke up in a strange place, it hadn’t exactly been planned. Is that it, Data? Another accident?”

Something in Data’s expression gave away the answer.

Lore laughed bitterly, “I can’t believe it. So, what happened? Did some clumsy human fall into a shelf and let my pieces fall back together!” He turned his face away in disgust.

“You were inadvertently reactivated during an experimental transfer of your neural net.” Data drew in a quick breath as he stopped himself from saying more.

“Ah, I should have known. You would be the last person to see me outside of a box. But that’s not it, is it Data?” He leaned forward now, tapping his temple with one finger, “You’ve been tinkering around in here.” His head fell back against the wall.

Data took a step forward, his voice firm, “You should know that it is my intention to see that you are deactivated and once more disassembled. I cannot allow you to be a danger to anyone again.”

Lore returned to his previous position, his eyes closed. “Do whatever the hell you want, Data.”

Several seconds of silence passed before Data turned slowly to leave the room. Just as the door hissed shut behind them, Lore let his anguished face fall into his hands.
“I would have appreciated some explanation. A hearing for a matter like this is unnecessary, and highly irregular.” Picard walked swiftly with Data at his side down the bright white corridor of the Federation Judiciary. “Maddox is playing at something.”

“I do not see any reason for Doctor Maddox to ‘play’ at anything, Sir. It is his objective that Lore be convicted and imprisoned.”

“Yes, Data, that’s true. But I think the heads on the Federation court are a bit more cautious than Doctor Maddox. There is a very good chance that they would agree with you that Lore poses too much of a threat to be imprisoned. Maddox won’t risk that. He’ll get around it.”

Data recalled the fortuitous words of the security guard. Maddox would find a way to get what he wanted. He always did. Once more, Councilor Troi was present at Captain Picard’s request. Over the years, her empathic abilities had become indispensable to the Enterprise. So much so that Picard took the addition of her insights as a given.

The wide room was not a place for court proceedings in the traditional sense. A large oval conference table barely filled the generous space. The far wall was nothing but a panorama of glass, slanting outward at the base in line with the trapezoidal contours of the building. The grey waters of San Francisco were turning black under the onset of dusk. The opposite wall housed a raised seating gallery in two tiers, both rows lined with chairs. The usual proceedings of this room were educational rather than legal, but this time it might do both.

Admiral Varek, Commander Marsh, and two other high ranking judges stood at the opposite side of the conference table. They nodded to Picard, Data, and Troi as they entered the large room. Although all three of them mentally registered the pointed ears of the three judges, it was Picard who noted the fact with suspicion. Troi sensed it and understood.

“It would appear that Maddox has stacked the deck in his favor.”

“Sir?” Said Data.

Picard’s voice was low, “Highly technical arguments always work best when emotion is not involved.”

Dr. Maddox, wearing his uniform and rank insignia for the first time in months, was at the end of the table near the gallery decks. A dark haired man of medium build conversed with him. The man wore a grey and blue suit of Bajoran design, although he was human in appearance. Picard was sure he recognized the man’s confident smile, but he could not place it.

A soft gasp escaped from Troi as she noticed the man and recognized him instantly, “Devin. It’s
been a long time. I must say, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Diana.” He smiled broadly, “It’s been too long. Although I have to admit that I sort of figured on you being here. You would want your ship’s second officer to have every possible advantage.”

Even with the passage of time taking its toll on human appearances, Data’s memory was infallible and he recognized Devinoni Ral instantly. It was only a few years before Lore’s deactivation that Ral had been a guest aboard the Enterprise-D to negotiate the sale of the Barzan wormhole. Even then, his reputation as a skilled negotiator and debater had been substantial, and the discovery of his Betazoid background had done nothing to hinder his career.

“Devinoni Ral.” Captain Picard formally shook hands with the man, keeping the tone professional. “I hadn’t expected to see you here, for sure. I didn’t think there were any trade negotiations here.” It was an empty statement; they all knew why he was there.

“Ah, well, trade negotiations are always going on, Captain, even when they’re not. But I’ve diverted my attentions these past couple of years. It turns out that Federation law presents even more interesting challenges than trade negotiations.”

“Interesting challenges…” Picard mused.

“Yes,” Ral continued, “and the most interesting usually involve Starfleet and its…unfortunate habit of breaking its own rules.”

Before anyone could respond to the insinuative remark, Varek tapped on the table. “May we proceed?” Varek took his seat next to his Vulcan colleagues while Commander Marsh stood apart to take notes of the proceedings.

Maddox did not sit yet. “If you’ll excuse me just a moment, I think it is customary for accused person to be present at their hearings.” With no hesitation, Maddox pressed the small control panel near his seat.

A transporter beam hummed on the first tier of the seating gallery. Once he had materialized, Lore fell into a chair and crossed his arms, an irritated scowl on his face.

“Objection!” Picard called.

Data stood quickly, “Admiral, it is not safe. Lore should not be moved.”

Varek raised a hand, “Your concerns are noted, Commander. Captain Maddox has assured me that Lore will be guarded behind a force field at all times. And it is the right of the accused to be present at their legal proceedings.”

Data’s eyes darted to Lore and back to the table, unsure of what to do. Finally, he sat down unwillingly.

“Now, Captain Maddox. If you would like to explain for the record why you have requested this hearing?”

Maddox sat now, “As you are aware of the events that led to the reactivation of the android Lore, it has come to my attention that it is the objective of many that Lore be deactivated once again and permanently disassembled. I have requested this hearing so that the court may be aware of the waste and…illegality of such a result. Which I’m sure would be the result if we were to go to trial.”
Data was unfamiliar with having to reign in his reactions as much as he was now. Luckily, Vice Admiral T’Rel grabbed at the same thought.

“Captain, what ‘illegality’ do you speak of?” The Admiral asked.

Maddox glanced at Ral. A confident nod from Ral assured him that he could continue.

“Admiral,” Maddox began, “It is my intention to argue that a trial would be inappropriate at this stage because Lore has already been illegally incarcerated by the Federation and out of accordance with Federation standards. I want to show that Starfleet officers captured and essentially executed Lore without making any attempt to arrest him or bring charges duly against him.”

Data found himself in the radically novel position of not being able to control his response, “Executed!”

Maddox was noticeably thrown by the outburst. It was Ral who continued, “When you put someone to sleep with no intention of waking them, what’s that called?”

A pained look crossed Data’s face for a brief moment. Had he executed Lore? Not knowing how to respond, his eyes shifted to Lore, fully expected him to be maintaining his uninterested posture. Instead, Lore’s eyes were incredulous, a look of complete amazement directed at Maddox and Ral. Apparently, Lore had not been aware of their plans.

Picard was adamant, “This legal technicality cannot be used to set a murderer free.”

Ral put on a convincingly incensed face, “Set free? Captain, I may be a lawyer, but I’m not a monster. It’s no one’s intention here to see Lore just released. At least not until enough time has passed to be sure of some serious change in him.” Ral paused, seeing a new tack, “Besides, I should hardly think that the right of a sentient being to not be unilaterally punished by Starfleet officers would be classified as a ‘technicality’.”

Admiral Varek interjected now, “The facts of Lore’s capture cannot be debated.” He turned to Picard and Data. “Commander Data, when you deactivated Lore, did you consider him to be your property?”

The lack of emotion in the Vulcan voice did nothing to lessen the sting of the words.

“No,” Data said quickly, “Lore is not…property.”

“Then if he is not property, are you of the opinion that he is a sentient life form, a person like yourself?”

“Yes, sir, Lore is a person, and as such he is responsible for all of his own actions.” Data replied.

“As are you, Commander.” This from Vice Admiral T’Rel. “The Federation is indeed not in the habit of ignoring its own law. If Lore is to be classified as a person who can be punished, then we must also recognize that he is a person with rights. Rights that have decidedly been violated here. We may not have one without the other.”

Data had the ability to perform countless mental calculations in the blink of an eye, and yet his mind darted so quickly now between thoughts that he was left speechless. A part of him was searching for something, anything that he could do or say that would lead to Lore’s deactivation, while another part of his mind accused itself. Was he such a hypocrite? Had he denied Lore the very thing that he had once struggled for—basic human rights? No! Lore had killed people. He had
tried to kill him and he had killed their father. There was no room left to trust Lore.

Admiral Varek turned to Maddox and Ral now. “Captain Maddox, if the evidence at your disposal has left you with the ability to throw out any charges against Lore, why is it that you have called this hearing?”

Maddox looked panicked for a moment. Perhaps his Vulcan ploy had worked too well. “Admiral, while I don’t believe Lore should go to trial, it would be fool-hearty to release a man who once threatened to end biological life as we know it. No, what we propose is…” he seemed to find his own words distasteful, “…probation of sorts.”

An audible scoff escaped Picard, “And this ‘probation’ would no doubt be limited to the confines of your lab, Doctor?”

Maddox didn’t miss a beat, “Naturally. Human criminals who have been found mentally deficient are often placed in rehabilitation until they can be marked fit for release. That is what I recommend here. Lore’s movements need to be controlled for a time, but he need not be incarcerated in a Federation prison.”

Picard leaned back in his chair, understanding now. “I see. Incarceration would have to mean a trial and a trial by jury no less. I’m sure that once enough victims’ families have been assembled, the jury might not be so willing to give heed to your argument. But, if by your own admission, the charges against Lore should be dropped, how do you legally achieve probation?”

Ral smiled now, “Very simply, Captain. A plea-bargain. As old and time honored as the law itself. Lore remains under control, but conscious.”

“And how does that not violate his rights?” Data pointed out, obviously disliking the words.

“Simple.” Ral shrugged, “We ask him. Given the choice between consciousness under restriction and the equivalent of death, which do you think he will choose?”

Admiral Varek tapped the table, “I am pleased that we have made some progress here. The legal questions seem clear now. Lore has the legal right to demand a trial—a trial that may or may not be dismissed on the ground that he has already been illegally incarcerated. On the other hand, the fact that Lore was unduly imprisoned without due process of law allows me to give some weight to the second option. I will consider these eight years as time served, and therefore I approve the proposed plea-bargain. Lore may choose whether to go to trial or to voluntarily submit himself for observational probation.”

All eyes turned immediately to Lore. He was leaning back in the chair, his arms crossed. His eyes were miles away out the long window as if he were unaware of the conversation taking place. Finally, after the silence alerted him, he dragged his attention back.

“Data, Data…” he chided, “Your scruples will be the death of you. Why didn’t you just proclaim me your property? You probably could’ve gotten away with it.”

“Lore.” Admiral Varek addressed him.

“Mmm?”

“The choice is being presented to you. Do you wish to demand your right to a trial, or do you wish to submit yourself, willingly, to probation?”

“Probation…?” Lore actually laughed.
“Yes. A ward appointed by these proceedings would be responsible for you.”

“Mmm…” Lore looked down, tapping his fingers rhythmically against his elbow, “Well, in spite of everything else, I don’t think I’ve quite reached the point of suicide yet. I think I’ll do without the trial.”

Maddox was unable to contain the look of triumph he exuded. He cleared his throat, “With that being said, Your Honor, I would like to formally submit my request to be appointed as ward by these proceedings.” Commander Marsh took the written request from Maddox and handed it to Admiral Varek. Maddox continued, “I believe that my experience with cybernetics is indispensable in observing Lore’s rehabilitation.”

Data gripped the arms of his chair. This is not happening.

Picard was in feverish conversation with Troi, trying to find a different strategy. Ral had stood up and started to collect his things. The proceedings were coming to a close practically without having started, and the panic in Data began to rise. He had to do something, anything, to stop this from happening. Maddox would never be able to control Lore; he had already underestimated him too much. It would be a matter of days, maybe hours before Lore would penetrate whatever security Maddox put in place. He could not let it happen, no matter what the cost.

“Admiral.” Data stood up suddenly. “Sir, I would like to formally submit my request to be appointed as Lore’s ward.”

Maddox nearly fell over when he turned, “What!”

Data turned quickly to Picard, “Captain, I would like to request a leave of absence so that I may be able to fill this position.”

Picard was aghast. “Data, this is not months we’re speaking of. This could be years. I do not want to lose you.”

Data shook his head, “I do not wish to leave the Enterprise, sir, but this is my responsibility.”

Picard could hear the conviction in his voice. “Yes. And I too have a responsibility. To the ship and to the crew of the Enterprise, and I believe I would be neglecting that responsibility if I were to allow you to go.”

“Captain…”

“I am sorry, Commander, but,” and Picard turned to look at Lore before returned his eyes to Data, “but the Enterprise will just have to learn to do with two androids.”

Maddox was bracing his arms against the table now, looking as if he might explode.

Lore rolled his eyes and stared at the ceiling.
More than three quarters of the hour had passed in silence. The only bits of sound were the soft rustle of cloth as Troi rose to get another cup of hot chocolate or the subtle tap as she looked over personnel reports. Occasionally, the young security officer who stood near the door, a phaser rifle in his hands, cleared his throat or shifted his weight lazily. Normally, Troi would never have busied herself with reports or hot chocolate when she had a patient, but it changed the circumstances when that patient refused to speak with her.

Lore sat in the soft blue arm chair, his legs slung out straight and crossed at the ankle. His eyes were low, as if analyzing the tops of his boots.

Troi sighed as she sat down with another stack of reports. It was always like this. For weeks Lore had been escorted to her office under guard, and for weeks he had said nothing. The reports and hot chocolate were no admission of defeat, for she was terribly patient, and every day she continued to ask the same questions that she knew he would not answer.

“How are you feeling today, Lore?” She felt silly asking the introductory question. It had been forty-five minutes, for crying out loud!

Lore closed his eyes and sighed as if he were bearing the screams of a petulant child. Troi looked up as she sensed the wave of sarcastic amusement from the guard. He knew just as well as she that there would be no reply. But, Lore’s silence was telling in itself. The Lore she had met, albeit briefly, had been nothing if not a prolific talker.

An impression of irritated boredom emanated from the guard, confusing Troi’s concentration. She lowered her data-pad, “Ensign, could you please step outside for the remainder of the hour?”

The guard hesitated, “Councilor, I have orders from Commander Data that he’s never to be left unguarded except in his quarters.”

“I understand that, and I assure you that I will be the one to speak to Commander Data if there’s a problem.” As if there would be a problem! Lore moved just about as much as he spoke.

“Yes, ma’am” He nodded, the ‘it’s your funeral’ comment clearly implied. The door hissed shut and Troi felt a brief moment of unease. She had never been alone with Lore, but the feeling wore itself out after a few more seconds of silence. He had had weeks to easily kill her.

She crossed her legs and decided to go with the new line of questioning she had planned for the day.

“Ensign Mark tells me that you have…rearranged your quarters. How is it going?”

Rearrangement was a cute euphemism. Lore had broken virtually every stick of furniture in the guest quarters to which he had been assigned. Even the mirrors in the bathroom had been smashed to powder. He had left only a single armchair undamaged. As she appraised him now, she noticed that dust and mirror particles clung to small areas of his thick black sweater, and it appeared that
hints of it had made it to his disheveled hair. As she took another appraising look at his soiled clothing, she knew that his behavior was not the only thing that hadn’t been changed in weeks.

As expected, Lore gave no reply to her question. Unlike most days, Troi was not in the mood for this. She had nothing to report but his silences and his private tantrums. She could not even tell what the violent outbursts against furniture were about. She doubted it was an objection to Starfleet’s choice of interior design.

“Let’s talk about the Omicron Theta colonists.”

Lore’s eyes lifted briefly.

Troi grinned. Ah, I’ve got you.

“Have you recalled anything new about your life with them? Any new thoughts on the matter?” She didn’t expect a response. She didn’t expect anything anymore, and after a few seconds turned her head in frustration.

“Why did you send out the guard?”

In spite of his low tone, she almost dropped her cup into her lap. It was like a frightening museum piece coming to life. “I…I could not concentrate while sensing his emotions. I can still feel him now, but it’s less irritating with him having nothing to react to.”

Lore’s fingers tapped the plush arms of the chair. “Can you sense me?”

Troi considered. There was no point in lying. “Yes, but not as clearly as others. I know what you’re feeling most times, but I don’t know what the feelings are directed toward.”

“Huh.” He mused, his eye down. “And what do you sense?”

Troi desperately wanted to know why he was choosing to talk now, but she could not let the opportunity slip away. “I sense a great deal of anger.” He seemed to shrug at that. Troi continued, “And sorrow.”

“Aren’t you afraid that I’ll kill you, Diana?”

She swallowed, “Why would I think that?”

“Because I’m a killer, my dear Councilor. That’s what I do, isn’t it?” His eyes fell and he whispered to himself, “isn’t it…”

“Do you believe you are what you do, or what you have done?”

He lifted his face now, “If you once made hot chocolate, but you don’t make it now, you could hardly be called a hot chocolate maker.” He leaned forward, “Of course, murder isn’t hot chocolate.”

“Then you define yourself as a murderer.” Troi replied.

“Is there anything else!” He voice broke into a bitter laugh.

Troi considered for a moment. She didn’t want to continue this line of talk. It didn’t feel promising. “Are you happy spending your time in your quarters?”

“Happy? I’m disappointed, Councilor. Usually you don’t ask stupid questions.” He brought his
hand to his head, rumpling his hair further with the motion. “Besides, does it really matter where I am?”

“It might.” She replied, “Sitting in your quarters twenty-three hours a day can’t provide much distraction.”

He scoffed, “Distraction from what?”

*Distraction from yourself.* She knew it, if only by sensing and not through some real proof. Although, she also knew it was too early to say so. “Perhaps some interaction would be beneficial, even if limited.”

He shook his head in amazement, “Sheep don’t *interact* with wolves.”

Troi leaned back, “You see humans as sheep?”

“No.” He said quickly, “They see me as the wolf.”

“How do you feel about that? About how people see you?” She regretted the question as soon as she had asked it.

Lore stood up, his vacant expression returned. Without a word he pressed the chime next to the door and walked out ahead of the two armed guards.

Troi sighed with frustration in spite of the fact that she had made more progress in six minutes than six weeks. Resolute, she tapped her commbadge, “Troi to Data.”

“*Data here.*”

“May I speak with you in my office?”

“*Is anything wrong, Councilor?*” He knew precisely when Lore’s appointments with her were scheduled.

“No, Data. Everything is fine.”

“I will be right there.”

Troi busied herself tidying the stacks of reports and returning the chocolate coated cups to the replicator until the door chimed a few minutes later. “Come.”

Data entered with a somewhat anxious expression. She smiled to reassure him, which seemed to work.

“Data, I would like to talk to you about Lore.”

Data nodded, “I have read your most recent report, Councilor.”

Troi frowned. She knew he had read the report, the report that was full of a whole lot of nothing. She knew that reports were what Data preferred, for it seemed that he did everything possible to avoid his brother. He had barely seen Lore in the past six weeks, and had certainly not spoken to him.

“How has he said anything?” Data ventured.

“Yes, he has. Although, not about what I want to talk about, Data. The object of this…
arrangement…was not merely to make you a jailer and the Enterprise a prison. I think that we need to consider the possibility of giving Lore more freedom of movement. Maybe even encourage him to interact with the crew.”

Data’s brow knitted as he shook his head, “Councilor, Lore cannot be trusted to move about the ship. He may attempt to harm a member of the crew, or to escape. To date, he has—.”

“—done nothing, Data.” Troi was serious. “Lore has been here for six weeks and for six weeks he has done nothing. He doesn’t talk, he doesn’t move except to smash furniture. Nothing.”

Data’s concern was palpable. “Would you not consider the outbursts in his quarters to be indicative of violence?”

Troi sighed, “If they were, he would have smashed ensign Marks’ skull instead of his mirrors. In fact, Data, Lore has made no attempt to escape or harm anyone in spite of numerous opportunities.”

“I do not know…”

Troi placed a reassuring hand on Data’s arm. “Data, no human would be served by isolation, just as I’m sure you wouldn’t. It is ridiculous to think that Lore could ever live with humans if we keep him from them.”

“Did Lore request time out of his quarters?” He asked, still suspicious.

“No. In fact, I would wager that he will find the exercise quite irritating.”

Data seemed puzzled, “If you believe that Lore will object to being placed among the crew, why do you believe he would comply?”

She shrugged, “He comes here. Every day, and without objection in spite of the fact that he doesn’t want to talk. I think…and something I sense tells me this…that Lore is simply past the point of caring where he is or what others do to him.”

Anxious eyes wrinkled Data’s face, “What form of crew interaction do you propose?”

Troi smiled, “Don’t worry, Data. I’m not suggesting we take him to Ten-Forward to tell jokes.” She considered for a moment, “Our detour to Earth has set back the maintenance schedule substantially, yes? I’m sure Geordie could use another set of non-sleeping hands.”

Data considered the possibilities. He did not appear so worried as before, but still cautious. Councilor Troi’s empathic abilities, as vague as they could be at times, were rarely misguided, and she seemed to sincerely believe in the plan.

“I will submit the idea to Captain Picard with my support.” He stood now, “I only wish that I were able to share your confidence, Councilor.”

“My confidence is not so sure, Data, but if guarantees are what we’re waiting for, the Enterprise will be decommissioned before Lore leaves his quarters.” She paused, thinking with her eyes closed, and then spoke seriously, “Data, do you remember what Lore said when they asked him what he wanted to do?”

Data nodded, “Yes. He said that he would choose probation.”

Troi shook her head, “No, Data. Exactly, what he said.”
Data tilted his head, “He said, ‘Well, in spite of everything else, I do not believe I have reached the point of suicide yet…’” He trailed off when Troi’s reaction told him he had said enough.

“That’s it.” She leaned in, “Data, that comment was not made in jest.”

Data looked down now, clenching his eyes. Oddly enough, he looked almost angry.

Data gave a weak smile as he bid Troi farewell and left her office. As he walked down the corridor to the turbo lift and passed the secured door of Lore’s quarters, he was sure he heard the last remnants of an armchair splintering against the wall.
Ascent I is my first posting on AO3. I'm still getting used to the system, so please excuse any weird formatting or redundancies. I'll get the hang of this, lol.

Chapter Seven

"I haven’t seen a child in a long time."

Commander William Riker looked down at Diana Troi with concern. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately. In the beginning, the idea of her being mere feet away from Lore on a daily basis had been almost unbearable. He had even toyed with the idea of standing guard himself during their sessions, but she would have objected to that of course. It was difficult keeping a professional façade, especially since she had agreed to marry him. Even after a few weeks of Lore’s lifeless behavior had eased his mind, he had worries.

The crew, more than eight hundred strong, had been placed on edge with the news that Lore – the cruel and murderous android of which they had all heard – was to be onboard for an indefinite amount of time, and Diana had had to bear the brunt of the fear and anxiety of hundreds of minds. But the last few weeks had seen improvement. People could be on the edge of their seats for only so long, and ship morale had returned somewhat to normal.

That is, until the announcement had been made. Now, Diana soothed her temple with her fingers, trying to ease away the tension that was not her own.

They walked quickly down the corridor now and into Ten-Forward. Troi had spent so much time in her office lately that she felt like she needed to get up and out. She was looking forward to a few hours of sipping coffee and reviewing personnel reports with Will.

Riker sorted through a list of names as they took their seats in Ten-Forward, “Carson, Smith, Hall, and Lenshire. Three ensigns and a Lieutenant.”

Troi raised an eyebrow, “Lieutenant? I thought these were all general engineering billets. Isn’t that usually crewmen and new ensigns?”

“Yeah, it is.” Riker sorted through the list as if it would give him an explanation. “I hope the Charleston isn’t giving us some problem case.”

“Mmm…” Troi didn’t relish the possibility. She ordered a cup of coffee, having had far too much chocolate lately, and reached for one of the data pads. “Who is the Lieutenant?”

Riker consulted the list. “Hall. Lieutenant Anna Hall. She’s…” Riker raised his brow in surprise, “She’s…wow.”
“What?” Troi looked up, engaged now.

“She graduated from the academy only twelve years ago. She made Lieutenant after four years active duty.” He shook his head, a bit amazed, “She has a medal of commendation and three personal recommendations, two from admirals.”

“I see.” Troi smiled appreciatively and took the report to have a look. She looked up, “Anna Hall…Now why do I feel like I know that name?”

“Care if I bother you two for a while?” Dr. Beverly Crusher pulled out a chair and took a seat next to Troi.

Troi smiled warmly. As much as she tried, she just could not get used to the straight blond hair that her friend had adopted a few years back. To her, Beverly Crusher would always be a wavy haired redhead. Crusher cradled a glass of water in her hands and took a deep breath. Troi could always see when Beverly had a story to tell.

“How’s sick bay? Isn’t this the middle of your shift?” Riker asked.

“Yes…” Crusher nodded, “But I needed to take a break.”

“What’s going on?”

“Ensign Blake.” She looked up with a sigh, “He had a panic attack.”

Troi could sense that there was much more to the story. “A panic attack? I’ve never heard of Ensign Blake having any problems. What happened?”

“Our newest engineer happened.” Beverly’s jaw clenched as she thought of the name she did not want to say.

“Lore.” Troi said after a moment. “What happened?”

Before Beverly could say a word, Geordie pulled out the remaining chair and fell into it. He immediately put his hand to his forehead and shook his head in exasperation. Troi did not have to guess about the subject of his thoughts. She wasn’t looking forward to this, but was pleasant anyway, “How’s it going in engineering, Geordie?”

Geordie dropped his hands in his lap, “It’s going.” He said quickly. He looked to Dr. Crusher, “How’s Blake?”

“He’ll be fine.” Her jaw was still clenched. Perhaps only Data had as much unmoving distrust for Lore as Beverly did. Lore had not only threatened to kill her son, Wesley, but she had suffered some rather painful injuries after he had attacked her with a phaser.

A satisfied half smile crossed Crusher’s lips now, “I suppose this will be enough to get him out of engineering and back into his quarters.”

Troi looked away. She knew Beverly had heavily objected to her recommendation to occupy Lore with some task. Before that she had been very vocal about her objections to having him on the ship at all, but Data had been adamant that it was his responsibly to watch Lore, and the Captain had been adamant that the ship would not lose Data. Troi sighed now. Perhaps she had made a mistake.

Geordie shook his head, “I don’t think so, Doctor. Lore didn’t actually do anything.”
“Didn’t do anything?” Riker leaned in, “Then what happened to Blake?”

Geordie took a deep breath, “Blake tripped over a tool box and…Well, I had Lore working on one of the force field projectors in the floor, and Blake sort of fell into him when he went down.”

Riker’s expressions widened, “Great…”

“And Lore…” Geordie sighed, “Lore pushed him away and looked at him.”

“Looked at him?” Troi frowned.

“I think *glared* is probably the better term. And Blake just couldn’t breathe,”

*…Because he was so afraid.* Troi didn’t speak the words. She didn’t have to.

Crusher folded her arms, “Glared at him? I’m a little surprised.”

“Exactly.” Troi jumped in, seeing her opportunity, “From my perspective, this is good news.”

“How is that good news?” He wasn’t trying to be confrontational, but he just didn’t see it like that.

“Consider what happened.” Troi began, “Since he’s been here, this is the first…altercation…that Lore has had with anyone. And his reaction was what? A dirty look?”

Geordie sighed again, but nodded. “Yeah. I guess it’s not really a big deal. And I suppose everyone will see that he didn’t do anything, and maybe things will get a little calmer down there.”

Crusher looked away, saying nothing. Troi was not telepathic, but her friend’s body language and emotions said enough.

Geordie patted the table. “Well, I’d better get back down to engineering before somebody else stumbles.”

Troi laughed but it was weak. He smiled a goodbye and left Ten-Forward.

Crusher turned back to Riker and Troi with an attempt at a smile, “I’m sorry I interrupted. You’re looking over the new personnel?”

“Yeah,” Riker took up the pad again, glad for the subject change, “We were just looking over the general engineering billets.”

“I’m interested to meet Lieutenant Hall.” Said Troi, “She doesn’t seem to fit the billet that she’s been assigned to. She’s drastically over qualified. Perhaps it’s a mistake.”

“Hall?” Crusher asked, recognition in her voice. “Is that Anna Hall?”

Riker nodded, “You’re familiar with her?”

“Yes.” Crusher smiled, “I met her at the academy when I was teaching that year.”

“You remember her?” It was an understandable question from Troi. Classes at the Academy were so large. “I can swear I’ve heard that name before.”

Crusher nodded, “Oh, it would have been hard to forget Hall. You don’t forget your only student under five feet tall. She would have made a fine doctor too, if I could have convinced her to
switch majors.”

Riker smiled, the idea of a five foot tall lieutenant amusing him a bit. “But she’s a good officer?”

“I haven’t seen her since the academy, but I’ll be very surprised if she isn’t a stellar officer. What does her file say?”

“Well,” Riker said, “It doesn’t say why such an accomplished engineer would choose an entry-level engineering billet.”

Crushed considered, “Last I knew she was slotted to be the assistant chief engineer on the Drake. I don’t know why she would pass that up. Although, I never knew her to be particularly ambitious.” Riker didn’t like that, and Crusher could tell. She continued, “What I mean is, she always went beyond in everything, but I always got the impression that she didn’t really give much thought to where it would get her. If it was interesting to her, she would do it. It just so happens that the most interesting stuff is usually the difficult stuff.” She took a sip of her water and thought out loud, “I wonder what she looks like now…”

Troi wondered at the significance of the comment. How much could a person change in twelve years? “Do you expect her to be much different?”

Crusher shrugged, “Well, there’s no telling, there being no precedent and all.” Before Troi could ask just what she was talking about, Crusher’s eyes were across the room, “Speak of the Devil….”

Riker and Troi followed Crusher’s eyes but could not locate any miniature officer who might be Lt. Hall. Suddenly, a woman found Dr. Crusher’s face and smiled in recognition. The woman who now walked toward their table was certainly not five feet tall. She was about five foot seven and was of a slender, but shapely build. Her auburn red hair was tossed back into a loose chignon with wavy locks framing her face. A set of dark blue eyes met each of them in turn along with a soft, pleasant smile. Riker stared for a moment not only for appreciation of her beauty, but for the fact that he could not believe this woman to be a lieutenant with twelve years of service. She looked young enough to still be a first year ensign or a cadet.

“Dr. Crusher.” She spoke with a warm, mezzo voice. She waited a moment for Crusher to invite her with a gesture of her hand.

Lt. Hall lowered herself into Geordie’s empty chair.

“It’s been a long time, Lieutenant.” Beverly congratulated before turning to Riker and Troi, “This is Commander Diana Troi, ship’s councilor, and Commander William Riker, first officer.”

Hall smiled to both warmly, and without a hint of the nervousness that should have come with the rank difference.

“Commander, I think I was going to be meeting you this afternoon. I have my introductory interview, yes?”

Riker nodded, “That’s right. Sixteen hundred hours. Although…” and he looked to Troi to confer, “the rest of my afternoon is empty. We could do it now, if you’re able.”

She smiled, “Sure.”

“Of course,” Troi chuckled, “Introductory interviews are usually conducted in the uniform of
the day.”

Hall looked down briefly as if to notice her clothing for the first time. She wore an ivory, V-neck sweater only a few shades darker than her porcelain skin, and soft white pants that led down to flat white shoes. In a move that made her look even younger, she folded one of her legs underneath herself with an abashed smile.

“I tried to tell that to the clothing processor in my quarters,” She rolled her eyes with a smile, “but it would have none of it. I don’t have many uniforms now, but plenty of confetti.”

Crusher laughed, “Oh, no…”

Hall shrugged, “Oh, I had it coming. I was rather rude to it.”

Riker smiled. He liked her already. She wasn’t nervous and she didn’t feel the need to put on a show for her superiors. At the same time, he didn’t feel like she was being disrespectful with her casual manner either. She reminded him of someone, but who?

“So,” Riker started, “I guess the first thing we should deal with is the errors on your personnel report. There are a few chronological mistakes. You didn’t enter Starfleet academy when you were eighteen, did you?”

Neither Riker nor Troi saw the knowing smirk on Crusher’s face.

Hall shook her head, “No, I wasn’t eighteen.”

Troi smiled, “That makes sense. Forgive me, but I didn’t think you were thirty-four.”

Hall smiled again, broader this time. “No, I’m not thirty. I’m thirty-eight.”

Crusher laughed out loud now, no longer able to hold it.

“I’m sorry, you’re what?” Riker replied, surveying again her perfectly smooth face.

Hall’s eyes fell and a noticeable blush colored her cheeks, “I’m thirty-eight. I wasn’t able to enter the academy until I was twenty-six. I wasn’t…um…big enough yet.”

Crusher leaned in with a friendly smile towards Hall, “She would have barely passed for fifteen then. But, I’m glad to see your height has finally caught up with your age. It’s good to see you, Anna.”

Hall laughed and turned back to Riker, “I’m sorry for the confusion, Commander. My file does say that I’m half El-Aurian?”

Riker nodded now, remembering exactly who she reminded him of. “Well, I guess that explains…some things.”

“As far as I know, I’m the only recorded case of an El-Aurian and a human.” She laughed now, although there was the slightest hint of bitterness there, “Every day’s a surprise to me.”

Riker smiled now, and noticed Guinan from across the room. He would have to remember to introduce the two of them. He had a sneaking suspicion that they would be fast friends. Although, he did wonder what two listeners would talk about.

He continued with the business at hand, “About the billet you’ve been assigned to. Dr. Crusher tells me that you were set to be the assistant chief engineer on the Drake? That’s a pretty fine
Hall took a deep breath, “Yes. I took that spot, but I gave it up when I saw the open place on the Enterprise.”

“The Drake is a fine ship.” He replied, searched for an explanation.

She nodded in agreement, “Yes, it was a very good position, but…” And her brow knitted as if confused by her own answer, “I wasn’t looking to serve on the Enterprise, but when I noticed the position I…knew it would be a mistake not to take it.”

Now Riker was sure that she reminded him of Guinan. There was an awkward silence as Riker and Troi tried to make sense of the answer. When Troi looked up to respond, Guinan had just appeared at the table. She looked down at Hall with that knowing, yet wondering look that was so common to her.

“That happens,” Guinan said simply, “It’s usually best to listen to yourself when it does.” Guinan smiled at Riker and Troi in a reassuring manner. They had long ago gotten used to her El-Aurian brand of intuition. They would have to get used to Hall’s.

She looked down at Hall with a warm smile, “I haven’t seen a child in a long time. Welcome aboard.”
Chapter 8

“You have sparkly dust in your hair.”

Geordie LaForge was finding it hard to resist a smile, in spite of the fact that he had plenty of reasons to frown. Repairs were coming along at a much improved pace, due in no small part—and this was the source of his frowns—to Lore.

Two weeks had passed with the Ensign Blake episode being the only minor blemish. It wasn’t to say that Lore was a model engineer, though. Far from it. He still spoke to no one, and would ask only the most basic, terse questions that were necessary to complete whatever task he had been given. Oddly enough, he was no faster than any of the human engineers, although it certainly wasn’t due to incompetence. Geordie had noticed while watching him work at a plasma manifold the true cause for it. Lore worked with the same effortless grace that Data exhibited at such tasks, only there were times when he would stop and stare. Then, he seemed to shake loose whatever thought consumed him and returned to his previous pace. Geordie had thought about mentioning it to Data, but he didn’t speak to Data about Lore. Data appeared to prefer it that way.

Still the entire situation struck him. Each time he directed Lore to some faulty replicator or twitching hollow-emitter, Geordie was stunned to watch him disappear without a word or so much as a nod to go off and complete the repair. Something—common sense, no doubt—told him that this was not Lore. Lore should have resisted, or flat out refused to perform tinkering manual labor for inferior humans, but never a complaint. Lore would complete the task and return soon enough to stand in Geordie’s way until he assigned him another. If Geordie didn’t know any better, he would say Lore was trying to distract himself.

In any case, he was running out of things to distract him with. He could work on virtually any system in main engineering, where there were dozens of people to watch him and raise the alarm if he did anything. And there was very little even Lore could do with a replicator or a case of plasma inducers, but the repair list was quickly becoming limited to deep systems, most of them in the bowels of the ship. Even as cooperative and relatively tame as Lore had been, not even Troi was ready to see him off into the Jefferies tubes alone. Although he really didn’t think anything would happen, not to the ship anyway, he wasn’t relishing the thought of figuring out just who was going to work with him.

He would keep it casual. That had been the problem all along. Everyone was just too worked up about Lore. They had to be alert, but they also had to realize that not everything with Lore’s name in it meant the end of the world.

The officers and crew mingled around main engineering as they waited for Geordie to start the daily maintenance meeting. As he appeared, the higher ranking officers began to move toward the center control table.

“Morning, everyone.” He said as he stepped to the table and tapped a few controls. “Just to get everyone up to date, we’ve corrected all the pattern buffers in the ship’s replicators, so we won’t be having to deal with that anymore.”

“Or the coffee, I hope.” Remarked a tall officer, standing close to Geordie.
Geordie smiled, “Why else do you think we bothered to fix them?”

As there were small laughs all around, Geordie noticed Lore enter main engineering. As always, he stopped almost immediately after clearing the door, and stood in the arch of the adjacent doorway.

Geordie continued, “We’ve got a few big ones today. Plasma relays, EPS conduits. Larson, I want you to assemble a team to work on the EPS conduits. The mess down there is a bit tricky.”

The blond lieutenant nodded, “In that case, I’d like Hall to have a look at it. She knows her way around those things.”

Hall stood near the railing among the ensigns and crewman. She drew her eyes smoothly away from the other side of the room and smiled, “If it’s tricky, I’ll have to.”

Larson beamed at Hall. Geordie noticed and subtly shook his head. He had read Lt. Hall’s file thoroughly, and although her outstanding level of engineering expertise was evident, he somehow doubted that was why Larson gave her so much attention.

“All right,” He continued, “Mason and Hobbs, I want you on the plasma conduits. Malferno, you’re with me in stellar cartography. Everyone else, you know where you are.” Just as he was about to put an end to the meeting, a thought occurred to him. Everyone appeared to be in good spirits, they hadn’t had a long shift yesterday; now was as good a time as any. “And I need someone with Lore on the power relays for deflector control.”

There were still some murmurs from those who hadn’t quite heard, but from those who had there was wide-eyed silence. For a few awkward moments, no one said or did anything. Larson leaned across the table, his voice low. “Commander, those relays are all in section three. That’s pretty…”

A quick look from Geordie made him trail off. Everyone knew where those relays were, buried in Jefferies tubes forty yards deep. Just as he was about to pull out and chastise himself for having entertained such a stupid idea, Hall approached the table and placed an already assembled tool box there.

“I can take the power relays, Commander. That is, if the EPS conduits can spare me.” She shrugged at Larson with a serene smile.

Larson was defiant, but still calm, “Anna, are you crazy? He—.”

“No more than anyone else.” She gave a casual smile once again and tapped Larson on the shoulder in mock indignation, “Besides, I know my way around power relays much more than EPS conduits.”

Before Larson could say another word in opposition, Geordie nodded to her and handed over a data pad. “Okay, then. Everyone knows what they’re doing.” He waited for Larson to begrudgingly walk away before turning to Hall. He sighed, “Thanks.”

“For what?” She smiled knowingly.

Lore, who had been across the room hearing every whispered word, appeared at the side of the table. Hall turned to look up at him and examined his cold, blank expression. For a moment she looked as if she might say something, but only nodded with the same soft smile. Lore returned neither. Without a word, she took the tool kit and moved toward the turbo lift as Lore followed. Every eye in engineering was on them as the lift door closed.
He moved immediately to the back of the lift while Hall stood closer to the doors. It was only the novelty of the situation that caused him to muster a vague interest in what she was doing. He watched the woman with mild interest, waiting for her eyes to dart over her shoulder in a quick, protective glance. It made humans nervous to have people behind them, especially dangerous people. He knew that, and so when she did not make any move to check his position or expression, he was mildly curious.

Hall raised the data pad Geordie had given her and began to look over the assignment. Lore read the information from over her shoulder before the lift slowed and the doors hissed open. Hall glanced back to see that he was following her and stepped out. It was surprising to him that when he did not move quickly, she altered her pace to match him. Her eyes fixed on the details of the assignment, and so she did not seem to notice the halting stares or anxious expressions of the passing crewmen. As they turned another corner, Dr. Crusher stopped a few yards away and stared.

“Morning, Doctor.” Hall said casually.

Crusher scowled and hardly let her eyes move from Lore. “Good morning, Anna. What are you up to?”

“Power relays.” She replied, “It looks messy, too.” Hall followed Crusher’s icy glare to Lore. He had turned his body half away and seemed to be running his eyes over everything except Crusher, avoiding her intensely. Anna waved again and quickly continued on, “See you later, Doctor.”

Crusher moved as if she might follow, but watched with marked disapproval as they walked out of sight. Hall and Lore approached the entrance to the junction room, and once inside Lore went immediately to the proper hatch. His general irritation was only increased by the absurd reaction he had had to Crusher’s sudden appearance. He saw no point in being stuck behind a slow human, and so crawled in without a backward glance. After a few minutes of crawling, which even he could only do so quickly, he stopped in front of a large panel marked in blue. He removed the panel in one sharp thrust and slid it further down the tube out of the way.

Hall reached his side after a few minutes, her breathing labored. She moved over to sit, and pulled her tool box in front of her. Lore scowled as she looked up at him. He had read the report. He knew exactly what would have to be done and in what order, but he also knew that this mildly interesting human would feel the need to discuss it. He waited now for her to begin with whatever inane greeting or question she had thought of. They all had questions. All they did was ask him questions!

Hall reached into the box and produced the first necessary tool. She held it out to him silently. He took it and began to disassemble the fixture in front of him, still waiting for her voice to break the silence. But as the minutes passed and the silence continued, Hall said nothing. She adjusted her seating and reached down to pull off her boots. She tossed them behind her in a heap and crossed her legs under herself as she began to disassemble another section of the fixture.

Lore looked down at her, suddenly curious about the unexplained removal of her shoes. Just then, she looked up and caught his eyes on her. He looked away quickly, scowling again. Now she would feel invited to talk! Why should he care about her removing her shoes? What did he care about ridiculous human eccentricities? He starred at the fixture to clearly indicate that he had no wish for words. As minutes turned into an hour, Anna continued to hand him the appropriate tools at each step of the process, always in complete silence. Eventually, he stopped waiting for her to talk, and worked in much the same manner as when he was alone.
The repairs turned out to be rather simplistic, which he did not like. It did not take long before his mind began to wander, and when that happened the images always came. This time it was a young woman, maybe thirty years old. She had a small human child in her arms and her expression was full of laughter. She covered her face with her hands and shouted playfully at the invisible person who had operated the camera. He knew her, even though he had never said a word to her. He knew her name and birthday and her favorite color. He knew that she loved the smell of coffee, but couldn’t stand to drink it. He knew everything that her husband had ever written about her, for deep in his memory were the personal logs of an entire colony.

He also knew that she and the child in the image were dead, nothing but dust on the surface of Omicron Theta.

Hall’s eyes rested on him, for Lore’s hands had stopped moving and his eyes stared miles away. For several minutes, she waited and watched while his expression turned from empty to agonized, and his hands gripped the fixture as if it would support him. Hall looked away anxiously but could not ignore his change. Finally, she reached toward him with a cautious hand and touched his arm.

Lore pulled away as if from a scorching flame, and turned an equally burning glare on her. A seething outrage ran through him, showing through his scowl and ominous posture. Anna Hall gasped sharply and turned her eyes away from him. Her lungs did not seem deep enough, and she took in quick, shallow breaths as her heartbeat quickened to a panicked pace. She closed her eyes against the burning, murderous glare that she had every logical reason to fear, and felt the sickening knots in her stomach as she tried to breath. Lore waited for her flight, was even hoping for it and pushing for it with his devouring expression, but what he saw was not the reaction of a frightened animal. Hall took several deep breaths before she opened her eyes again and fixed them resolutely on the panel in front of her. With a determined posture she picked up the tool she had so skittishly dropped and continued to reassemble it.

Lore stared at her, but much of the fury had faded. Instead, a bewildered expression overcame his scowl as he observed the strange girl. Was she just going to keep doing her work? Had she not noticed his reaction at all? As he watched her work mechanically, her eyes never leaving the jumble of cables in front of her, he identified something he had not seen in many of the humans he had met.

_She’s brave._

He turned his eyes away from her but continued to listen to the ebbing rush of her heart as it slowly returned to normal. Silently, and with no other reaction at all, he continued to work on the power relay. This time, he was able to keep his mind in the present.

As he hooked the panel back in place, Hall slipped her boots back on and closed the tool box. Not a word or glance passed between them as he followed her back to the junction room. As impressed as he was, he was sure there were limits to this woman’s personal fortitude, and that she would make her flight as soon as possible. But when she reached the junction room before him, she stood to face him, waiting for him to join her before opening the door and proceeding into the corridor. Once again, she slowed to walk beside him, a move that only compounded Lore’s increasing confusion. He scowled in her direction, thinking with some amusement that the blonde one, Larson, had been right. Maybe she was crazy.

As the lift doors opened on main engineering, Lore immediately scanned the room for the chief engineer. Geordie had spotted them, and Lore watched as he gave Hall as appraising look. She walked away from Lore now to meet him.

“It was pretty simple.” She said, “only a converter error.”
LaForge nodded, but didn’t seem convinced by her nonchalance, “And everything went well?”

Lore turned toward the exit. He knew there was nothing else for him to do today and no point in remaining. He had not even left the room yet, and already he felt as if the faces were there in his quarters, waiting for him. Besides, he had no interest in hearing tall tales, for no doubt the young woman would make much of her death defying encounter with the evil android, and he scowled in disgust. Just as he made the exit, he heard the woman’s smooth, mezzo voice.

“Fine, Commander.” She said plainly, “Everything went just fine.”

Lore turned his eyes back one last time to gaze in astonishment.

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Lore stood against the wall in his empty quarters with his eyes closed. The memories were back again. This time it was not the colonists, but fresher faces, or those that would have been fresher were his memory capable of fading. There were dozens of them, all in the differing colors of the old Starfleet uniforms. There were no happy faces or playful laughing. Instead, he saw their backs as they ran away, only to fall as their human muscles succumbed to exhaustion and fear. He saw their horrified faces looking up, their arms out in one last vain attempt to protect themselves, but it was futile. A crushing blow from a chalky white hand, strained and deformed with Borg implants, and they were no more. They were not his own hands that Lore saw, and he had never touched those people, but he might as well have. They had died because of him, because of his dealings with the Borg. He opened his eyes on the black room now. He had no need for light, just like he had no need for food or drink…or furniture.

As much as his memories consumed him, he could never fall into them the way humans did, forgetting place and time. Each second ticked by just as slowly as any other. Eventually, the hours passed and it was time once again to leave his quarters and spend a few hours among the humans who hated and feared him. Still, it was better than the alternative.

Since his movements about the ship made security practically worthless, the guards that had once flanked him were now gone. He scoffed to himself when he thought of it, for they had always been worthless. If he had chosen to do anything what could they have done? He moved down the corridor quickly, passing members of the crew as he went. Sometimes he was sure he could have made the journey blind, for not a single crewmember ever remained on his side of the corridor when he passed. They managed to make it to the other side with a quickened pace, and at one time this fearful show would have pleased him. Being able to inspire fear was a useful tool, but he cared very little about it now. The tool was still there, he just didn’t have any use for it anymore.

As usual, he arrived a few minutes after the maintenance meeting had already started. He preferred it that way. The last thing he needed was to be in the same room with a bunch of idly conversing humans, not that any of them would have dared to speak to him. Still, the Vulcans were another issue entirely. Their lack of fear left them with little hindrance. Luckily, they were fast learners, and his stubborn silence had gotten rid of each one in turn.

He stepped aside into the alcove and listened to the meeting from afar, hoping for something difficult, something with nuance. While his innate ability to entertain countless lines of thought simultaneously made the effort almost meaningless, it still helped to have something on which to focus. He closed his eyes and waited. A smooth round voice came through the others, “The log
LaForge frowned, “There’s no quick way through those manifolds. It’ll have to be step by step testing. And a little ingenuity.” He nodded to Hall, clearly seeing her as the ingenious sort, then looked to Larson, “Larson, your team still working on those EPS conduits?”

Larson nodded grudgingly, “Yes, Sir, but I think we’ve got it this time.”

LaForge clapped his hand against the data pad, always his unconscious signal that the meeting was over, “All right, then. The teams are limited though, so…” He looked to Hall now, “Do you think you’ve got this or could you use a hand?”

Lore looked now, for LaForge’s tone said more than his words. The pleading expression on LaForge’s face was subtle, but Lore could see what was going on. He was begging Hall to once more take on the dubious task of babysitting the ship’s problem. Lore glanced at Hall and ground his teeth together, for there was no possible way that she would choose Hell twice.

“I could use some help, Commander. Thanks.”

Lore raised his brow. Did she not understand what LaForge was asking her? Did she not know what help she was getting? LaForge gave an appreciative nod as everyone moved off to their assigned tasks. Lore waited as Hall picked up two cases and walked directly toward him. She stopped short and looked up at his vacant face with a resolute, almost challenging expression, and extended one of the cases toward him. For the slightest moment he hesitated and frowned at her in confusion. But his desire to start their task was greater than his desire to understand her strange decision, and he took the case.

This time he did not get a chance to read the maintenance report in her hand, and since he would not ask, he followed her for nearly fifteen minutes into the deepest bowels of the ship with no idea of where they were going or what they were doing. After following her down countless ladder wells and along even more curving Jefferies tubes, they finally came to a place so untouched that layers of dust had settled everywhere. Lore collected most of the dust on his knees and hands as he suddenly led the way down the last Jefferies tube, and stopped when he noticed Hall settle in front of an already exposed secondary plasma manifold. He began removing the various panel covers when a worried thought occurred to him. She had said that this particular problem had not been diagnosed, that it would be a trial. While the idea of a complex problem pleased him, the possible side effects did not. They would have to confer and discuss the problem to come up with possible solutions. He would have to talk to her. Were it not for the burden of his own thoughts awaiting him in his quarters, he would have given serious consideration to leaving right then and there.

Hall pulled her boots off with a relieved sigh and opened the case she carried. She pulled out all of the various instruments and placed them on the deck. Reaching over, she took the case Lore had carried and did the same with its contents. Lore watched as she closed both cases, set them aside, and rested her chin on her knee. Apparently deep in thought, she looked over the exposed manifold and the tools before glancing at Lore. He broke eye contact with her as soon as she made it, sure that he would have to leave. The possibility of talking was so repugnant, he never even considered it.

As he rose up on his hands to move past her, her outstretched hand blocked him. She held the data-pad out toward him in a giving gesture, urging him to take it, and it was her complete silence that gave him pause to actually take it. She was motioning, miming in a way that was purposeful. As soon as he had taken it she fell back into a composed position against the bulked with her legs folded underneath her.
Lore released a low scoff. He had been right. Silent collaboration on this task would be impossible, but solitary work was not. As he watched her pick up each tool to check it for proper calibration, he realized that she did not intend to do anything more than that. He looked down once more at the data pad she had given him and saw that she had given him everything. The problem, the work, all of it was his and his alone. No words were required.

A sentence formed in mind suddenly, and it just nearly made it to his lips before he caught himself. She saw it though, and the look of expectation that raised her brow made him close his lips into a tight line.

_It won’t be that easy, human._

A short sigh of clear disappointment and Hall let her head fall back against the bulked. Lore turned his attention to the manifold with a satisfied grin. For nearly six hours he fixed his eyes on the work, running through each likely problem while he eliminated possible solutions. He only noticed Hall when she moved, which was rarely. She eventually pulled herself out of her cross-legged position and stretched her legs out before leaning back against the bulked, her knees drawn up. Each time he placed the phase induced on the deck, she would reach to recalibrate it for its next use, and place in exactly where he had left it. When he tossed tools further away, a clear indication that he no longer needed them, he would spot from the corner of his eyes two slender ivory hands placing them back into their foam molded positions in the cases. Except for these occasional movements, she was still and thoughtful to the point that he thought she might have fallen asleep. He noticed, in fact, that she was not even staring at him. Instead, she gazed at the ceiling or closed her eyes in the manner of daydreaming.

As he came to the close of his work, he took pause when he thought that she had said something to him. It took only another moment for him to realize that she was humming softly to herself. It was not loud, for with the gentle hum of the ships’ engines to compete he doubted a human would even have heard it. In spite of himself, he listened as he closed up the manifold and hooked the panels back in place. He did not recognize the tune, which was not surprising given his rather limited exposure to music. There was a short, simple melody interspersed with more meandering, lyrical passages. Her eyes were closed, and she hummed for some time while oblivious to his eyes on her. As he watched, the same frustrated scowl returned to his face. If she had not intended to work with him, why did she bother having him along? She could have done it all alone. As he asked himself the question, and others, his irritation weakened. He was glad that he had had something to distract him for as long as he had. Surely she had not meant to do him the favor?

Hall opened her eyes and surveyed the closed panel and assembled tool kits. She smiled a relieved smile and sat up, pulling her boots back on her feet and taking one of the cases in hand. This time, Lore led the way back along the winding, tedious path until they finally reemerged in the junction room. Once there Hall braced her hand against the door frame and stretched to her full height while rubbing at the muscles of one of her shoulders. Lore noted the action and shook his head at yet another reason why he could not explain her willingness to bring him along. Surely if she had been moving around for hours instead of sitting silently on the deck her muscles would not have been so stiff.

_Stupid humans...._  

The engrossing nature of the work had left Lore no time to get lost in his disturbing thoughts, and so “they” had finished in six hours what should have been an all day affair. They were greeting in main engineering by the sharp glances of many—no doubt all shocked that Hall was still alive—when LaForge approached Hall to discuss the outcome of the plasma manifold. Lore knew that the day was at an end and there was no more for him to do there and as he turned to leave the room he
listened idly to the both of them.

“Record time, Hall.” LaForge mused approvingly, “I thought you’d be in there all day.”

There was a slight pause in which Lore imagined the woman beaming with satisfaction, but the words he heard did not match that reaction.

“Would have been, Sir, but Lore’s very good. He did everything.” Her tone was not begrudging or complaining. In fact, if his knack for reading human tones did not fail him, he was sure she was praising.

“Everything?” LaForge was a bit skeptical, perhaps detecting modestly in her.

“Everything.”

Lore laughed to himself with an astounded shake of his head. That human, as crazy as she clearly must be, was becoming downright tolerable.

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The next two days saw the development of what Geordie was beginning to view as an awkward routine. Each morning he held the maintenance meeting and assigned tasks to those he knew would do best in certain areas, but when it came to final assignments there was always confusion. He waited each morning for someone other than Lt. Hall to step forward and agree to work with Lore, and each morning she stepped forward with an untroubled smile. It almost appeared as if she had resigned herself to working with the most feared person onboard, for she never made prior arrangement to work elsewhere. Hall discussed other maintenance issues with her colleagues, gave advice and direction, but always with the silent understanding that she would not actually be helping them.

As Geordie walked to maintenance control that morning, he was hopeful that there would be other takers. After all, Hall had been working with him for four days and nothing had happened, so why not someone else? She did not even complain, although he chalked that up to strong professionalism, for he had already concluded that Hall as a damn fine officer.

The meeting started as usual, and also as usual Lore entered main engineering a few minutes afterwards. Geordie’s expectation that Lore would stand in the adjacent alcove was by this point so ingrained that he hardly gave another look to Lore’s direction. But Lore did not stand in the alcove. He crossed the room unhindered, in a bit of a rush it seemed, and came to stand next to Hall as if there were nothing amiss about it. It was only after Lore had been standing next to Hall for several seconds that he noticed the curious glances of the crewman, each baring the same unasked question.

_Idiots._ Lore rolled his eyes and looked away to the corners of the room. How long did he have to be around these people before they would stop treating him like a loud noise? He even expected Hall to have the same reaction, and so he was quite surprised when she smiled up at him before strolling over to the table. She took a particular data pad from the pile there and tapped it a few times with her fingers.
“The port power couplings on deck five have an intermittent error. We should be able to get those and the ones on deck four. I’m willing to bet the problems are related.”

Hall paused for approval, which LaForge gave in a questioning nod, then turned back to Lore. He finally looked down at her as she handed him the pad. His hesitation was not long enough for others to notice, but he was sure that Hall did, for she pressed the pad toward him insistently. He read the information in a second and handed it back with a terse gesture, as intentional as it was habitual. She took it back calmly.

LaForge cleared his throat and finished the meeting with his usual send-off as Lore remained in the center of the room, waiting. Hall reappeared as quickly as she had walked off, and presented Lore with a tool case before she turned to lead the way out of engineering. It all seemed so professional, so cool, as if his presence in engineering, let alone his recent behavior, was nothing that could possible ruffle the feathers of such an elite group of professionals. What nonsense he knew it to be, and he rolled his eyes with a scoff as they both left the room. Surely the humans were aware of all of his superior abilities, and yet they still seemed blatantly unaware that he could hear them whisper! “Poor Hall. She’ll never get out of this now….”

“…her own fault for being brave….”

“I should have volunteered for her….”

Nothing in their words bothered him. It was merely their ignorant assumption of privacy that drove him to irritation. Their anxious, exaggerated blathering was in his ears all day, something that he would have been spared in some small measure if they knew just how perfect his hearing was. Why didn’t they know? He concluded rather quickly, as he and Hall passed yet another group of shifty-eyed crewman, that it was more than likely Data’s fault. In some empathetic attempt to respect human privacy, Data refrained most of the time from using even half of the full range of his hearing. That, plus the fact that Data was highly unlikely to react to anything he had not been meant to hear—for that would be terribly rude—was a fair explanation for why Lore found himself surrounded by naïve whispers.

As he walked next to the young woman—a bit too young to be a lieutenant, he thought suddenly—he wondered if she too thought she could get away with slight whispers in his vicinity. Not that he had ever heard a questionable word from her. She had intentionally never spoken to him, which placed her alone into the category of barely tolerable humans he had to deal with. But she was a human and, from what he had gathered, a popular one. But that made sense. After all, she was rather attractive, and he had already noticed that virtually everyone found her approachable.

He brushed the thought aside. There was no point in interesting himself in foolish human interactions.

The power couplings, like the plasma manifold from before, were reached after a long journey through the Jefferies tubes, although their access point was not in the tube itself. Hall swung her legs out into the small junction room that provided alternate routes in all four directions. It was here that she located the access point to the power couplings and opened the tool box. Lore came down from behind and removed the large panel, as custom had made his job by this point.

The infrequently used crawl spaces had added a new layer of dust to Lore’s already marked clothing. The black shirt and pants could not, especially on the sleeves and knees, pass for anything but grey now, and without sleep to disturb his hair, it still glistened in places with the last dusty remains of a shattered mirror. Aside from being a terrifying sight, which he was by reputation, he had also become a bizarre sight for those so used to seeing the professionally polished Data.
They could see after a few moments of scanning that Hall’s hunch on the power couplings had been correct. He worked to isolate the affected system while she prepared to remove the malfunctioning components. As they performed their tasks silently, he noticed that she had not removed her shoes, which she had done every time thus far. He decided that the reason must have something to do with the Jefferies tubes, as they were not in them now, and they both stood as they worked. She was not humming to herself either, which he concluded must have been a reaction to the boredom of watching him work alone yesterday. The melody replayed in his mind a few times, and he wondered if it was something she had learned or a product of her own imagination—.

He cast the idle thought aside.

Suddenly, a strange huffing sound came from the back of Hall’s throat as the dust tickled her nose. Her face fell forward into her hands as she produced a violent and vocal sneeze. It was quickly followed by a second before she sniffled and wiped at her eyes with an expression of mild embarrassment. As she brushed the red locks she had dislodged back behind her ears, Lore’s subtle laughter forced a smile to his face. It was not the sneeze itself, but her embarrassment. How ridiculous to be embarrassed by something as harmless as a sneeze!

He drew the laughter in until it was nothing more than a suppressed smile, but it was too late. She shook her head with a broad grin, her cheeks colored red, and tried to drag her expression back to normal without much success. Lore regretted the lapse instantly, although he wasn’t sure why. He did not have intentional designs on being impersonal, it just seemed to be that way by default, and not caring about social niceties was usually enough to deter humans. Laughter was welcoming, friendly, and he felt a dislike at the possibility of being seen that way. Of course, he was not so self-deluded that he was not able to recognize the flaws in his own logic. If he cared nothing for the crew or with interacting with them, why did he leave his quarters? He knew the answer to that. They were in his quarters. Their dead faces could be anywhere if he let them, but they were guaranteed to be in that empty, pointless room.

Musing on the flaws in his personal doctrine, he wondered if a flirtation with curiosity would be so terrible. After all, to go out of his way not to ask questions indicated that he somehow worried about her response, and he found himself terribly, irrationally curious to know what the hell was wrong with this Lt. Hall. This bizarre woman, who appeared to be not at all afraid of him, confounded him even by the simple act of removing her shoes. But he recalled the panic of her heart beat and her shallow breath when he had turned on her so fiercely that first day. She had been afraid, certainly, and then he understood. It was far worse! As if being unafraid were not strange enough, she was actually resisting any of the fears she had! Why else had she agreed to work with him again?

It was not long before the repairs were complete and Hall placed the last tool in the box. They would have to perform the final diagnostics from main engineering to make sure that all had gone well. After making their way back, they both approached the system display table and Hall began bringing up the diagnostic program. She came to his side from around the table and, reaching in front of him, logged into the console to activate it. She moved away to another station on the side wall, and Lore ran his eyes over the activated console. He noted the access files for warp control, environmental systems, even navigation. It took only point zero-six seconds for him to realize that Hall had laid at his hands complete and unhindered access to every system onboard. If he was inclined, he could make it rain in Ten-Forward or initiate a warp core breach.

Lore pulled his fingers back from the console. He looked over at her and waited for the mistake to register in her mind, for her eyes to widen in sudden panic as she realized what she had done. But she only smiled at his baffled expression, and gave him a signaling nod. Still uncertain, he accessed the appropriate program and began the system check.
Keeping his eyes down on the table, he appeared to focus on the readout, but paid it no attention. He could not make sense of it all. Hall did not appear to be incompetent; he did not get that impression at all, and yet was this mistake not proof? Then, other possibilities that came to him seemed just as ridiculous. Perhaps she knew the possibility of danger was there and was rolling the dice. Nonsense! A human would have to be suicidal, but what other explanation was there.

Does she trust me?

“You have sparkly dust in your hair.”

With a movement painfully slow, he looked up at her as if a statue had just come to life, and he wondered if he had gone mad to see it. She examined all of him intently as she leaned over the table toward him. Her eyes moved from his disheveled hair to his dust streaked shirt. She chuckled lightly, “You’re a mess.”

Lore did not notice the dozen people that stood around with frozen expressions trained on them. He was too busy dealing with his confused frustration. He leaned back from the console, shaking his head as if she were the most confounding thing he had ever seen.

What is wrong with you!

Before he could bring himself to scream the question at her, to demand to know what she was thinking, Hall caught sight of LaForge and turned to meet him on the other side of the room. She did not leave before giving Lore a courteous nod of farewell.

Lore pushed away from the console and abandoned the room.
Chapter 9

“I don’t work with anyone else!”

Lore stood in front of the replicator with his black shirt balled up in his hands. He had already considered using the laundry processor, but a closer examination had revealed that the weeks of wear had broken the stitching on the cuffs and hem. Grumbling to himself, he shoved the shirt into the replicator and pressed the controls. In a hum of light that illuminated the corners of the dark room, the garment was reconstituted into pure energy and disappeared. A quick scan through the clothing list left him astonished by the absurd variety, and with no deliberation he instructed the computer to produce another black shirt. But before he took it, he hesitated. Was black the best choice? It was dust, after all, that had gotten him into this mess, and black showed dust so easily. He decided, and reconstituted the item before replacing it with an identical shirt in a heather grey. He replicated a pair of the same black pants, decided that the boots were easily dealt with, and placed all the items on the sunken shelf next to the replicator.

That having been dealt with, he turned his attention to the more troublesome part. It was not as if he had never done any of this before. The short time he had spent on the Pakled freighter would have disgusted even a stout human, so he was certainly no stranger to personal hygiene. But now he had other things to consider. For instance, why was he bothering to do this? Everything had been fine. Days of distracting work with a semi-tolerable human had been going smoothly, only to be ruined because his appearance had forced the issue. Well, he vowed she would not have that avenue of attack again! At the same time, he did not want to change too much and give her a reason to comment on that, for that would lead to conversation, which would lead to questions. Why does she take her shoes off?

He consulted the replicator list again and produced the first bathing soap on the list. A bottle of bright blue gel appeared, and he did not even have to remove the cap to detect the intense scent. He cringed and put it back. A strong fragrance would hardly avoid comment, and all he wanted to do was get the dust out of his hair. Consulting the list further, he instructed the replicator to produce the most innocuous item, and a bottle of frosty clear gel appeared. The scent would be barely detectable to any human, and he placed it on the shelf next to the clothes.

He picked up the pile of items and walked to the unnecessarily large bathroom on the other side of the room. Due to space restrictions, he assumed, the crew had placed him in a guest quarters months ago, and guest quarters came equipped with water showers. He sighed irritably. A sonic shower would have made the soap unnecessary. Humans considered the water showers a luxury. He did not.

After scrubbing his hair with the soap and crossing the room for the forgotten necessity of a towel, he pulled the new clothes on and stood silently in the black room. He had no mirror with which to examine the change in his appearance, but he decided it did not much matter. His clothes were clean and there was no dust in his hair. What strange, redheaded human could ask for more?

It took no time for his rumpled hair to air dry, and he walked to main engineering with the anticipation of a day mentally occupied. Once there, he decided that to take the surprise out of yesterday, he would once again not bother with the alcove. He went directly to stand next to Hall.
It wasn’t just that he recognized the tacit understanding that was going on. The fact that no one else ever volunteered to work with him made it more that tacit, but it was also his preference. It was not as good as working alone, but better than working with someone else.

He looked down at her briefly and laughed to himself. She was one to talk of messy hair! She did not have her long red tresses in a smooth upsweep like most of the female officers. Instead, it was curled up into a loose chignon at the back of her head, with wavy locks falling out to frame her face. This, although not as polished as the others, did not strike him as a negative. She looked up at him as an amused smile lighted her face. She made no attempt to hide the appraisal she cast over his new appearance, and when her eyes rested on his clean, yet still tossed hair, her smile clenched to suppress a laugh.

Lore grumbled and shifted his weight. It was an unconscious physical reaction which he had always disliked but never bothered to remove from his emotional programming. He waited for Hall to receive their assignment, which she did without the slightest hint of a question, and came back to him with the data pad. He reached for it, but she hesitated. The satisfied smirk was on her face again, and she seemed to be debating with herself.

Don’t do it, human. He raised his eyebrows and stared directly at her, daring her to say something about it. Of course, she did not, and handed him the pad before heading toward the turbo lift.

The work was his alone today. The repeated system errors in the port shield generator did not lend themselves to obvious repair. Just as before, Hall removed her shoes and took a seated position to see after the tools while he worked. It was far more complex than he had anticipated, and the work took even longer than it had the day before. It was nearly five hours being cramped in the tubes when Hall pulled from the inside of the tool box a small square of silver foil. She tore the wrapping open and crumpled it in into a tight ball. Lore recognized the little circles she held to be cookies. She rested her back against the bulked and began to hum softly the familiar tune while she ate.

Lore frowned as he continued to work. A human engineering team would have stopped at this point to eat lunch or to stretch their cramped muscles. But she had made no such request yesterday, and it did not appear that she would do so now. He shrugged. Maybe she did not mind cramped spaces or limited food. Maybe she was just as strange to the others as she was to him. Of course a quick recall of the rest of the engineering staff rather knocked that theory. It would have been obvious to anyone with eyes that Lt. Larson harbored some attraction to her, and that the lower ranking officers found her particularly good company.

He looked at her now from over one shoulder. She was still seated against the bulked, only her eyes had closed and her humming had progressed to an inaudible singing. Her lips moved silently to lyrics he still could not decipher, and he found himself suddenly curious as to why she was still there. Why did she keep agreeing to work with him? In spite of all of his carelessness he was pleased that she had agreed, no matter what strange reasons she might have. It was distracting, all of it, and what he needed more than anything was a distraction. He completed the work after no less than six hours in the tubes and followed Hall silently to the junction room. Just as before and the day before that, she said goodbye with a polite nod, and he walked to his quarters.

The distraction that engineering provided was such a relief, and his desire for it so intense, that when he entered main engineering the next morning, he was instantly alarmed when he did not see her there. He ran his eyes around the warp core where she often stood, and looked up to see if perhaps she was on the upper catwalks. But, she was nowhere to be seen, and he did not hear the calm viola of her voice. He moved to the alcove and waited through the meeting. Perhaps she was
late. Humans did not have internal chronometers, so it was reasonable that she had overslept. As the meeting broke up and all began to go their separate ways, he darted his eyes around the room nervously.

Where is she?

LaForge stepped into the path of his vision and held a data pad toward him. Lore looked at the stern faced man, for the two of them had an interesting history. LaForge did not like him, and Lore knew he had good reason.

“The hollow emitters in science lab three are malfunctioning.” LaForge said as he handed the pad to a Vulcan officer that came to stand near him. “Lt. T’Rek will work with you today.”

Lore frowned at the unmoved Vulcan as if he were some kind of insect. Were they all crazy, or was human memory just that bad? He worked with Hall, he had always worked with Hall. There was no other reason for him to work with anyone but Hall! He took a step back and shook his head defiantly, looking over the room one last time. No Hall.

Spinning around to the control panel behind him, he ran his fingers over the screen until the display gave him the information he sought.

“What are you doing” Said LaForge, more curious than concerned. But as Lore turned his back to leave, LaForge called after him with a frustrated wave, “Where are you going? Lore!”

***

Even in the constant blackness of space, one could always tell when it was morning on the Enterprise. Ten Forward was filled with the soft buzz of patrons not roused enough to be loud, and the strong scent of coffee wafted through the entrance. Dr. Crusher mixed a small spoon of cream into her strong coffee and ran her eyes over the crew evaluations in her hand. Since she was not wholly in the mood for evaluations, she was thankful when Troi and Worf entered the room and started toward her. Worf ordered a prune juice straightaway as Troi laid a data pad on the table with a frustrated sigh.

“My updated report on Lore.” Troi nodded toward the pad.

Crusher cringed, “I don’t suppose you have anything new.”

Troi smiled at the attendant who dropped off her usual coffee and took a relieved sip, “You haven’t heard?”

“If anything worth hearing had happened, I’m sure I would have seen proof of it in sickbay by now.” Crusher replied with obvious distaste.

“I’m not talking about panic attacks.” Said Troi, “Geordie has Lore working with other officers now, on systems outside of main engineering.”

Worf grumbled menacingly, “He should not be in engineering at all. He should not be here.”

Troi frowned, “Worf, you know why the Captain made his decision, and I for one think it was the right move.”
Worf grumbled again but did not argue. He knew.

Crusher sighed and shook her head. “Well, I have to say I’m impressed with the people in engineering. I don’t think any of my staff would work with him if I ordered them to.”

Troi gave a short, humorless laugh. “Don’t give them too much credit. Only Lt. Hall works with him.”

Crusher pulled her lips away from her coffee, “What? Hall works with him? Alone?”

Troi nodded with a wry smile, “I suppose news doesn’t travel that fast. Geordie tells me she was the only one who volunteered all week, and that now it’s the general assumption in engineering that she works with Lore.”

Crushed leaned back and crossed her arms, shaking her head with concern, “That girl was always too accommodating. She probably did it to save someone else from the task. I’ll see how she’s doing.”

Troi smiled and looked past Crusher, “She looks fine to me.”

Crusher turned in her seat to follow Troi’s stare and found Hall sitting down to a table next to the windows. She wore civilian clothes and carried a worn, green book in one hand. After ordering from the attendant, she sank lazily into the plush chair with one leg tucked underneath her and began leafing through her book.

Crusher shook her head and smiled, “Maybe later. I’ll assume she could use some time to relax.”

Worf grumbled in agreement. After several minutes of light conversation, the tempo in Ten Forward began to pick up and at least two dozen people chatted casually over their eggs and steaming cups of coffee. It was the lazy atmosphere that made it all the more startling when Lore appeared. His stride paused only long enough to survey the room after he had entered, and it did not take him long to see who he was looking for.

Crusher gasped and only just stopped herself from getting out of her chair, and Troi had to place a calming hand on Worf’s arm.

Hall, her eyes and thoughts absorbed into the yellowing pages of her book, did not notice Lore as he made a straight line for her. She brought her cup slowly to her lips, and paused when a close shadow fell over the table. Lore looked down at her with a wide, accusing stare, and kept clenching and unclenching his fists. Hall looked at him sideways, stunned, and slowly closed her book. It wasn’t until he scoffed in exasperation and tossed his hands up in a silent ‘well?’, that she moved her lips as if to speak. Instead, she shook her head and shrugged, apparently lost for what to do.

Lore let the words fall from him, “You’re not in engineering!”

Hall’s mouth fell open, stunned, and Lore shot quick glances around the room. He had been so single-mindedly focused on his objective that he had given virtually no thought to the ramifications of where he was and what he was doing. Suddenly uncomfortable, he stepped sideways and motioned with an impatient hand for Hall to come with him. She stammered a few incomprehensible sounds and shook her head in confusion.

Lore sighed, almost in agony, and closed his eyes. She could repair a power relay without saying a word, and yet could not deign that he wanted her to follow him! He could suddenly feel the eyes on him, bothering him as they never had before, but he knew he shouldn’t be there. It was
a socializing place, and he belonged there as much as a Ferengi at a charity ball. But it was her fault! If she had shown up to the maintenance meeting like she was supposed to…!

“I was in engineering.” He spoke the words as if each syllable was a labor, “and you…were…not.”

Hall gasped as the light of understanding washed the shock out of her face. She became more composed, and placed her hands gently on her book, “I…” She searched for what to say to someone who never wanted to be spoken to. “I don’t work every day. I’m off duty today.”

“Wh—!” Lore scoffed as if that were the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard. He shifted his weight toward the door, and then immediately back, for he was desperate to leave and yet unwilling to leave without her.

Hall tilted her head and spoke very low, “Did no one else.—.”

“I don’t work with anyone else!” His voice was a harsh whisper, “I prefer to work with you.” In the corner of his vision, he saw Worf bracing in his seat and glaring at him. Lore knew that if there were anyone with a good reason to want to kill him, it was Worf. Lore guessed, quite correctly, that prior to meeting him Worf had never lost a fight, and Klingons do not forget a defeat any more than a victory. It should not have concerned him, but he realized with some alarm that the idea of killing the man was just not very appealing. He clenched his teeth and looked to Hall one last time, pleading.

Hall saw the agonized look on his face, and saw also as Commander Worf rose from his seat protectively. His eyes were on her, along with every other in the room, and she took another quick look at Lore’s pleading, guarded face. She stood slowly, lazily, as if there was not a thing the matter, and took her book causally in one arm.

“Sure. No problem.” She quipped, a bit louder than necessary, and walked past Lore with a soft smile. He waited but a moment for her to pass him before following in shocked relief. As they neared the door, he noticed that Hall was giving every impression that nothing was amiss. But some are not so easily fooled. Crusher rose in her seat, “Anna?”

Hall turned toward Crusher but did not stop walking, “Good morning, Doctor.” It was a hello and a goodbye. Lore followed quickly as they slipped through the automatic doors and into the corridor. The relief he felt on getting away from the doors was so intense, he could have sworn it was almost physical. He closed his eyes and looked straight ahead when he opened them, for he was sure that she was staring at him.

Thank you, Anna.

He did not say the words, and moved to walk ahead of her in order to lead the way to science lab three. It amazed him that she did not say a word as they walked, for surely she must have been curious, and his words had effectively destroyed their mutual understanding of silence. But still, she said nothing, and did not stare at him. When they finally entered science lab three, T’Rek, the Vulcan officer, looked up at their entrance with a curious lift of his brow.

“Lieutenant.” He nodded to Hall, “I was under the impression that you were off duty today.”

Hall shrugged with a dismissive grin, “What else is there to do on this ship?” When T’Rek responded by eyeing Lore suspiciously, Hall sighed and reached out for the data pad, “You can tell Commander LaForge I have this covered.”
T’Rek appraised her with a judgmental face, and handed her the pad, “I will be sure to inform Commander LaForge.”

Lore glared at the Vulcan as he left the room, for he detected the subtle threat in his tone. If Hall did as well she gave no indication, and walked to a large display console. She brought up a detailed schematic and pointed out the location of the hollow emitters, tapping the screen. Lore stood still and watched as she walked to the appropriate panel on the far wall and removed the covering to inspect the emitters inside. An awkward feeling that he knew he had experienced before, and yet could not place, seemed to rush over him like water. He should not have gone to Ten Forward. He should not have made her come with him. In spite of the fact that it was her fault—yes, he was still sure about that—he still could not resist the idea that maybe he should have left her alone. But he knew that he could not work with anyone else, and the idea of not distracting himself with work was simply impossible now that he had grown used to it.

Hall smiled at him from over her shoulder and motioned for him to join her. As he came to her side he noticed how different she looked when not in uniform. She wore a loose, off-white tunic with white embroidery on the cuffs and neckline. It was more delicate and intricate that what he was accustomed to see people wear. Her hair was also different, left loose and flowing down her back in thick red waves. She brushed it back behind her ears, but a lock always seemed to escape. It made him smile despite himself.

He knew he should have left her alone, and yet also knew that he was too selfish to do so. He began the work with a real sense of unease, for he guessed it would only be a matter of time before she grew tired of being so accommodating.
Chapter 10

"Are you alright?"

Counselor Troi had been wrong. News did travel fast. The next morning as Hall entered main engineering, Larson approached her at a jog.

"Is it true? He actually found you and made you work with him?"

Hall rolled her eyes, "Yes and no."

"Yes and no? What does that mean?" He was fast on her heels as she walked toward the main system table.

"It means, yes he found me, no he did not make me work with him."

Larson smirked. "Agreeing to do something when you can’t refuse is the same thing."

She gave him a crooked smile. "And why wouldn’t I be able to refuse?"

His wide expression of disbelief was answer enough.

"John, you’re going to give yourself an ulcer."

Larson started to say something more, but was interrupted when Geordie tapped the table and started the meeting. Geordie handed out the easy assignments first, as usual, and went over the night shifts’ logs. He did not look up, although everyone else did, when Lore came through the double doors and walked to Hall’s right side. Larson quickly retreated from her left with a scowl.

"And for the special op today," Geordie nodded toward Hall and gave her an encouraging smile, "I’m putting Hall in charge of shuttle craft repairs in bay one. It’s your call, Hall, so pick a good team." He paused and gave her a pointed looked, "Anyone you need."

Lore’s eyes fell to the deck briefly. Although his knowledge of humans was not nearly as thorough as he liked to believe, he recognized silent communication when he saw it. LaForge was giving her an out, a much needed reprieve from the job no one else wanted.

Hall shrugged with a facetious smile, "Only the best."

Geordie chuckled, "All right then. That’s it, people. Let’s get to work and maybe we’ll whittle this down before the ship’s decommissioned."

Lore stood still as Hall walked toward the table to retrieve a stack of maintenance logs, and Larson immediately followed. Several other officers also lingered, either expecting to be chosen or hoping. For all her youthful appearance, no more than twenty-four or twenty-five Lore guessed, she could inspire authority.

"Larson, Magee, I’ll have you on the port thruster on shuttle six. Kendrick and Briggs, the impulse engines on number two are brand new and need to be run through the usual checks. And Blake," She turned to the young ensign standing a few feet away, "You would be doing me a big
favor if you would handle the navigation system on number four. I think it hasn’t been done because it’s a little terrifying.”

Blake beamed rather obviously and moved off toward the rear storage lockers. When she did not say any more, Lore could feel the angry frustration coming to the surface, but it was quite secondary to the other, much stranger sensation of disappointment.

*She didn’t choose me…*

His eyes were down, sulking in a most uncharacteristic manner, and so he did not immediately see the warm smile on her lips as she held a data pad towards him. When he did see it, he took it with a cautious, sidelong glance at her. She smiled again, starring at him quite directly, and winked.

He tried to suppress his smile, but it broke anyway. It was a few minutes later when Hall, Lore, and a very unhappy Larson entered shuttle bay one. It was busy with movement, for in addition to shuttle repairs, a science team was cataloging storage units against the far wall, and a group of crewmen were undergoing basic flight training. Lore consulted the data pad Hall had given him and he was pleased that he would be working on the docking clamps near the aft of the bay. Although Hall would not be working directly with him, he seemed content in the assurance that he would be distracted from his thoughts for a few hours.

After a half hour’s work on the docking servos, he found himself once again pondering on the strangeness of her reaction. He had spoken to her in Ten Forward, publicly, but she did not appear to view those words as an open invitation to conversation. She had silently given him the assignment as she always had, and had said nothing the day before in science lab three. It simply did not make sense to him. At least, until he realized the answer in a sudden flash that made him lift his head up from the servos. She was being *considerate*. She was being silent because she thought it was what he wanted, and he could see that Hall would assume no invitations from his actions. He would have to make one.

*Maybe…*

“Disconnect the power! It’s gonna overload!”

Lore turned just as a shuttle a few yards from him shuttered with a loud spark. Three of the four docking clamps severed in a violent shattering of metal as the shuttle’s operational engines strained against the remaining clamp. The craft spun around on its newfound axis, like a boat with one oar. It took but a moment for the remaining clamp to fail under the strain, and the hovering shuttle spun out into the direction in which it had been released. From the moment he heard the cry to the moment the shuttle spun out in its’ deadly line, mere seconds had passed, no time for Hall to do anything other than to see it coming. She stood a few feet from the aft bulked, still half bent down in her former position. Her eyes were frozen in shock at the two tons of metal coming to crush her into the bulked.

Lore’s tools fell from his hands. *No! Please!*

He could move only slightly faster than the quickest human, but it was enough. In a single second, he ran into her, pushing her back against the bulked just in time to raise his hand in front of her. With his other arm braced against the bulked over her, the shuttle slammed into his outstretched arm with enough force to crush a human like an accordion. The force of the impact slammed him back against the bulked, but he did not allow the length of his arm to collapse. The metal of the bulked, unable to withstand the assault, buckled under his other braced arm.
The shuttle bounced back as if from a rubber wall and hummed as it slowly slid away. Lore watched it in its belying innocence as crewmen scrambled to gain control of the now harmless vessel. But he did not care about the craft, and turned his eyes down in a panic to Hall. She was sitting with her back against the bulked, where he had thrown her, her eyes staring wide in no discernable direction. He bent down and grabbed her shoulders.

“Are you all right?” His voice was full of panic. He ran his hands up to her neck to make certain that she had not sustained any serious injury.

Hall said nothing. Her peaches and cream skin had gone porcelain white and her eyes starred up at him in shock, not blinking as they bored into his. For a moment he wanted to shake her to make sure she was not in shock, and he ran his hand through her hair and over her skull to make certain she had not sustained a head injury. But as crewmen rushed to the scene, calling for a medical emergency, the cold and vacant expression that he had worn for months returned to his face like a protective mask. He released her shoulders and backed away from her.

Crewmen flooded into the space and surrounded Hall. Larson was the first one to reach her, and put his arm around her back as if to help her up.

“Anna! Are you okay!” Larson shouted as he looked at her, but after a second he looked up at Lore with narrowed eyes.

Several of the crewmen, seeing that Hall had not been obviously injured, surveyed the nearly two foot deep dent in the bulked. They stared in amazement at the impression that came to the perfect shape of a fist deep inside.

“Holy shit!” A crewman shouted in sheer amazement, and turned to Lore. Many of the others followed his gaze as well. “Are you…injured?”

Lore’s eyes darted from face to face, becoming increasingly uncomfortable. He shouldn’t care. He should not have cared what they thought or how they looked on him with mixed expressions of amazement, but he did. He felt as if they were looking on his glass house, and he could not bear it. Lore took a few steps back, and made one last survey of Hall. She was still seated against the bulked, staring up at him as if Larson were not shaking her like a fool. Reluctantly, but still with a large amount of relief, Lore fled for the shuttle bay doors.

Hall turned her head slowly away from Larson. She stared in awe at the two foot dent that Lore’s arm had left in the thick steel of the bulked.

Data stood still as Dr. Crusher waved a tricorder over him for the fifth time, and consulted a read-out on the nearby display. It was not that the yearly medical exam bothered him, as it did many crewman, but he simply could not see the necessity in performing an annual medical exam when the condition of his body and mind had very little to do with medicine. Not only that, but he performing self diagnostics of a much more thorough nature on a regular basis, and he saw no reason for Dr. Crusher to busy her schedule with him when he was quite capable of examining himself. However, procedural formalities were written in stone, and all Starfleet officers were required to have a medical record that was updated annually. Never mind that his read more like an engineering log than a medical record.
Crusher smiled, “As usual, Data, you’re in perfect health.”

He nodded and made a subtle smile, “Thank you, Doctor. I watch what I eat.”

Crusher laughed and shook her head indulgently. Data’s sense of humor had come a long way since he had once pushed her from the deck of a sailing ship, his failed attempt to be funny. In fact, she was certain she detected a progressively coy, dry sense of humor forming in her long time friend, and she found that it suited him very well. It was a good thing to notice, as she was glad to once again see him in some humorous spirit. The last two months had seen Data cautious, preoccupied, and in general bad spirits. Crusher knew that he worried, endlessly and obsessively, since Lore had come on board. He worried that a dangerous threat had been brought into the heart of the Enterprise because of him, and anything bad that happened to the ship or the crew would be his fault. As much as Crusher was happy for his newfound life of emotions, she found herself glad that her friend was not human. Such self-induced stress would certainly have damaged a human’s health.

“Well, that’s about it, Data.” She said as she snapped the tricorder shut, “Until next year--.”

“Shuttle bay one to sickbay!”

“Go.” Crusher looked up immediately.

“Doctor, we have several crewmen coming in with injuries. There was an accident with one of the shuttle craft.”

“Anything serious?” She asked as she silently directed several nurses to preparations.

“Nothing too serious, Doctor. They should be walking in any minute.”

Before the voice on the comm could finish, the sickbay doors hissed open. A young man, supported by two fellow officers, hopped in on one foot. He groaned as several nurses lifted him onto the bio-bed and began to gingerly undress his bleeding foot. He was immediately followed by a seasoned science officer who was holding his scalded hand close to his chest, a pained but resilient look on his face. As Crusher hurried to examine the burns on the science officer’s hand, she saw Hall calmly enter the room. Data noticed as well, and thought she might be in shock, for she stared away as if lost in thought, and did not appear to have any physical injuries. However, Crusher took a more concerned notice when a very animated Larson rushed in behind Hall, looking over her as if she would collapse any moment.

“Sit down so they can look at you.” Larson directed Hall to one of the bio-beds and tried to lead her there.

Hall shook her head and drew a hand politely out of his, “Let them help Kendrick and Briggs. I’m perfectly all right.”

Larson scoffed as if he did not believe her. “Come on, Anna. He tossed you down pretty hard.”

Hall shot him a severe glance. “Better ‘tossed around’ than crushed, John.”

“Yeah.” He nodded his agreement, but ruefully.

Crusher stepped away to let a nurse treat the burns, and approached Hall, “So, what happened down there?”

Hall smiled uncomfortably, “I’m not quite sure, actually. I think there was a power overload in
the shuttle’s impulse engines….” She trailed off to try and recall more.

Larson stepped forward, “The shuttle broke its’ docking clamps and spun out. It almost crushed her.”

Hall sighed and looked away.

“Do you feel cold or nauseous?” Crushed asked Hall as she examined her pupils.

Hall produced a wry smile, “I’m not in shock, Doctor. The shuttle never touched me. Although, you may want to examine Lore.”

“Lore?” Data repeated with some alarm, and came to stand next to Crusher. “What do you mean?”

Hall took in the surprised and suspicious look that Crusher and Data exchanged, and paused as if to consider her words. “Yes. I don’t think he was hurt. I doubt he was, but still….”

Data stepped forward now, “Was Lore working on the shuttle when it broke its’ clamps?”

Hall tilted her head at his suspicious tone, “No, Sir.”

“Why would you think that Lore might be injured?” Crushed asked, “Was he hit by the shuttle?”

Hall shook her head again, “Not quite. He stopped the shuttle…with his hand.” Seeing the confusion in their eyes, she continued, “Lore blocked the shuttle from hitting me. He saved my life.”

Data’s look of astonishment bordered on disbelief, and he shook his head as if the very possibility were absurd. The idea of Lore—Lore!—saving another person’s life left him with only one possible question. “Why?”

Hall gave him a most peculiar look, for the question did not seem to make sense to her. “Sir?”

Data looked away, lost now as his thoughts ran in various directions, but Hall’s eyes did not leave his face. She looked more closely at him, examining, until he finally noticed and gave her a questioning look.

“I’m sorry, Commander.” Hall said with a short laugh at herself, “It’s just…Well, you two really are different.”

Crusher gave Data an awkward glance, but Data appeared not to note the comment. He continued, “He blocked the shuttle from reaching you?”

Hall nodded.

“I see.” He said, and his voice betrayed his amazement. Data looked at Crusher as if to gauge her acceptance of the whole affair, but all she could do was to return his mixture of shock and skepticism. It was a plain explanation that Hall had given. A shuttle had lost control, it was going to kill her, and Lore had stopped it before it could. Of anyone else, this would not have thrown him, but of Lore it made him hope for something that he did not want to. He hoped that it were true.

“Mmm…” Hall looked down, reluctant, but then shrugged to herself, “He asked me if I was all right.”
His reaction was instant, “Is Lore still in shuttle bay one?”

She sighed and shook her head, “No. He left.”
Chapter 11

“If you were going to destroy the ship, you would have done it already.”

Lore angrily paced the length of his bare quarters. It had been a mistake, and yet he could not make himself believe that he would have—could have—done nothing. No, he did not regret blocking the shuttle, he did not regret pulling her back or even placing himself in the line of the crash. He just….Why did it have to be in a room with so many people! Why did it have to be under the eyes of humans who were, no doubt, running to Data and Troi at that very moment to tell them what a good boy he had become! Oh, yes, Lore had been reformed! A life saver! Would they not be pleased with themselves, and would they not congratulate each other on a job well done?

Lore gritted his teeth at his own thoughts and finally came to a stop in the center of the room. His pride screamed at him to fix the situation. He had to do something, anything, to make them realize that they would never change him. If he was going to do anything differently, it would be his choice alone. He was no puppet to be altered with a pull of a string.

Killing her could fix it.

Lore halted his steps and covered his shocked face with his hands. Had that thought truly entered his mind? Had he conjured such a possibility? A wave of self-loathing so intense swept over him that it was almost physical. He could see Hall, her face grey and vacant in death, and he shoved the thought aside as if he would mentally destroy it. It didn’t matter how it had happened or who decided to take credit. He was different. He knew it, he felt it, and that difference did not include murder.

Three days had passed since the shuttle bay, and he had not once left his quarters. He knew why, although he did not like to admit it. He simply did not wish to see their reactions, for certainly there must have been some mass reaction to what he had done in the shuttle bay. Perhaps the event had only increased their reservations about him. After all, he had stopped with a hand an object that would have crushed every bone in a human body, and strength could be just as reviled as it was admired. But that reaction would at least be tolerable to him. Not preferable, but tolerable. The other possibility, however, was far less pleasing to him. What if they had taken the event as a mark of transformation in him? What if they had all concluded that he had suddenly developed a conscience, computer generated and infallible, and that it would now be perfectly acceptable to speak to him? What then! Lore cringed away from the thought while a much different one occurred to him.

How did she react? He was amazed when he found himself hoping that her reaction had been good. As the worried possibilities ran through his mind, he clenched his right fist and held up his left. It was a half fist, as the thumb and ring finger would not retract more than an inch, and his index finger had stopped functioning hours ago. As he lifted his arm a few inches above his waist, further movement became impossible and he let the arm drop to his side in frustration. Certainly it was better than crushed bone, but he was not indestructible. As he looked down at the arm again, he almost groaned with misery. Three micro-hydraulic servos in his shoulder blade had burst, and the crunch he detected with each minor movement told him that at least one of them was shattered.

Lore walked toward the door and placed his hand on the frame. What could he do? Who could
he go to? Knowing that he could not repair the damage himself was the sharpest sting of all, for he had never in his life needed assistance with his physical well-being. The possibility of Data came to him and was dismissed immediately. He did not want to see Data, and certainly did not want to talk to him. Lore knew, instinctively and from past experience, that his own rage would make the meeting impossible anyway. LaForge? No, for he would probably decline to do anything without Data present. Dr. Crusher…?

There’s a death wish….

He tried to flex his hand again, but only two fingers moved. He had waited too long already, and every bit of movement that transferred up his back and into his shoulder made it worse. Eventually, he would have no choice but to rely on Data.

“Hall…” His eyes lighted with the epiphany as every glowing review of her that had ever reached his ears replayed in a fraction of a second. She was a magnificent engineer, highly regarded, and he knew she often gave advice to officers much older than her. She could do it. Would she do it?

Like a madman with no judgment, he pressed the comm panel on the wall, “Lore to Lieutenant Hall.”

A few silent second followed before a calm, pleasant voice replied, “Yes?”

Lore hesitated and cursed himself for not having devised some kind of plan, “Can you…I mean…can I come to your quarters now?” He cringed at himself in disgust. What kind of request was that? How difficult was it to ask for help?

Impossible!

Another moment of silence followed, and he dreaded what she must be thinking or doing. But then, “All right. You can come now if you want.”

“Fine.” He said and closed the comm. He checked the computer for the location of her quarters, for he had no idea and had never seen her go there, and was glad to see that it was in the same section as his own, one deck down. He was not in the mood to run into people, and as he stepped out into the corridor, he darted his eyes in both directions. Seeing no one, he moved to the turbo lift as quickly as he could while not running, and instructed it for the deck below. The doors opened on a clear corridor, and he stopped after a few yards before one of the dark grey doors. The placard read in small red letters, Lt. Anna G. Hall.

What does the ‘G’ stand for?

He tossed the idle thought away and pressed the chime. He was here for help, not for company.

“Come in, please.”

He stepped into the room quickly to escape the exposure of the corridor, and stood still by the door. Hall stood on the other side of the room behind her desk, an empty plate and glass in her hands. She smiled at him as she crossed the room and deposited the articles back into the replicator, a welcoming gesture, as if to assure him that she did not think ill of his visit. At least, that was how he read it. She was not in her uniform but obviously in preparation for bed. She wore a pair of grey cotton pants and a red short-sleeved top, both hugging her form rather more than her uniform did. Her hair hung loose around her face, locks of it tucked futilely behind her ears. Lore shrugged suddenly and looked away as if to survey the room. It was clear why the men in
engineering said her name with a nuanced tone. She was very beautiful.

Hall finished with the replicator and walked back to her desk. She leaned back against it and folded her hands in front of her expectantly. She smiled, and waited.

Lore took a few steps into the room and wished that he had not insisted their relationship be based on silence. At least that would have made this easier. “I…need your help.” He said.

The stress in his voice was enough to sober her light-hearted smile, “What’s wrong?”

He lifted his arm as far as he could and attempted to close his fist. When the damaged fingers did not move, he looked up at her and met her suddenly concerned eyes, and was amazed at what he saw there. It was concern, almost painful looking. She reached out almost instantly toward his extended arm, but in a suddenly flash drew it back.

“I’m sorry.” She said, and looked up at him again. “May I?”

Lore scoffed, but it sounded more like an awkward laugh. He had certainly given her reason enough to be wary of touching him. He decided she didn’t need the stress and he didn’t need her feeling uneasy, so he deciding to defuse everything by rolling his eyes playfully and making an exaggerated sigh, “Ah, fine.” He held his arm out toward her.

He expected her to grab his forearm, maybe touch his hand just enough to feel the skin, but it was not so childishly fleeting. Hall took his arm in one hand as if it were some delicate thing and began to inspect the contours of his wrist. She pressed his palm between her thumb and fingers, her eyes and attention completely absorbed by what she must have perceived there. Lore gasped at the confidence of her inspection, for she passed his wrist and ran her hand up as far as his elbow. As she pushed up the thick fabric of his sleeve to reveal the golden white skin underneath, she squeezed his arm at intervals with a fascination that he could not ignore.

She released his hand suddenly, and laughed at some inner thought. “I’m sorry. I was curious. I suppose you—.” Her smile faltered, “I suppose Commander Data gets that a lot.”

Lore pulled his sleeve down slowly, “I would assume that he does.”

“It’s not what I expected.” She bit her lower lip suddenly as if to pull back the ill-thought comment.

“What did you expect?” He challenged.

“Um…” She looked at the ceiling with a smile, “I’m not sure. Your hand feels…warm. Human.” She waved a dismissive hand as if to clear her own foolishness and continued, “You said you needed my help.”

“Yes.” He said flatly, “I have to repair some damage in my arm, but…” Lore’s prideful eyes looked away, “I can’t do it myself.”

Hall’s serene expression faded to concern. She ran her eyes over his arm again, “What do I have to do?”

“Do you know anything about micro hydraulics?”

She nodded.

“Then it should be easy to talk you through it.”
“All right.” She said at once, but stood awkwardly still. “Did you…did this happen in the shuttle bay?”

Lore wondered why that should matter to her. He nodded.

Hall sighed and shook her head, “I told them to see you.”

“To see me?” He repeated. “What do you mean?”

“I told Commander Data and Dr. Crusher that you might be hurt, that they should check on you.” She replied, and the matter-of-fact nature of her comment was most disarming to him.

“Ah.” It was the only reply he could fathom. Perhaps that was why Data had tried to see him three times in as many days. Data was nothing if not dutiful. His thoughts did not linger on Data, though, and he looked away to suppress a strange smile. *She thought I was hurt?*

Hall moved toward the door and placed her hand on the frame as she slipped her bare feet into a pair of red slippers. “If it’s micro-hydraulics, we’ll need some specific tools. Everything is in science lab two.” She turned to the door, waiting.

Lore frowned instantly and even took a step deeper into the room. “I would rather not walk around the ship.” He thought for a moment that he would need to explain himself further, but Hall’s soft smile spoke to her understanding.

“I’ll be right back then.” She turned to the door and disappeared into the empty corridor.

Turning back into the room, he placed his hands on the smooth glass surface of Hall’s desk. It would be over with quickly, he told himself. Hall was a competent engineer, and he was sure that she would complete the repairs efficiently and he would be on his way. In the mean time, his impatience took a secondary position to his curiosity, and his eyes washed anew over the dim room. Hall’s quarters were smaller than the guest suite to which he had been assigned, but was still comfortably large. Directly across from the door was a low glass table sided by two plush grey arm chairs and a small sofa tucked into the alcove under the windows. The desk jutted into the room from the interior wall, separating in a loose manner the living space from the bed in the far corner. A doorway a few feet from the foot of the bed led off into what he assumed was the bathroom area.

Lore walked over to the bed and brushed his fingers over the white quilt that lay unkempt across it. It looked old, worn, and yet in bright condition. He even saw mending in a few noticeable places, and a set of initials embroidered in one corner. Moving away from the bed he stood before the sunken bookshelf over her desk and took a quick inventory of the objects there. He reached for one of the books—an actual paper book—for the spine showed no title. A quick look at the inside leaf revealed it to be the complete works of Edith Wharton, printed 2096.

*She likes antiques….*

Lore set the book back in its place and switched his attention to the photos, which were many. They were of different sizes and sat in a variety of mismatched frames, but one in particular caught his attention. He picked up a smooth, black wood frame and looked over the rather curious image inside. The photo had been taken outside on a bright sunny day in what appeared to be an antiquated Earth town. The image showed the long stretch of a street lined with red-brick buildings until the street came to a short end at the foot of a green, pine covered mountain. The landscape itself was interesting enough, but it was the center focus of the photo that struck him as bizarre. In the forefront, and directly in the center of the street, was a red-haired woman sitting at a glistening
grand piano, her back to the photographer. She wore a long ivory gown that flowed over the edges of the bench and fanned out onto the bare ground in a fantastic display of beauty and absurdity. It was absurd, he thought, for the picture almost made no sense. What was a grand piano doing outside in the center of a street, and a street in what appeared to be a small, remote village? He frowned at the image and peered at it closely to detect the trickery behind it, but he was certain he could see none. It was real. That piano had been there and that woman had sat at it in her fantastic dress. Lore smiled as he continued to analyze its details. It was absurd, and he liked it a lot.

The doors opened with a swish and Lore pulled his eyes away from the photo, but it was too late to put it back undetected. Hall carried a small case in one hand and walked to the desk to set it down. She looked immediately at the photo and then at Lore, an embarrassed smile crossing her lips. Lore waited for her to say something about the photo, or at least about his uninvited snooping, but she only continued to smile as she opened the small case and began removed various small tools.

“What is this?” He asked briskly, and turned the frame around so that she could see it.

She did not look up, “It’s the promotional photo from my last concert.” She cleared her throat in an awkward manner and continued fiddling with the tools.

Lore turned the frame around and looked again. “Concert? Are you a professional musician?” His tone was cold, bland, as forcibly uninterested as he could make it.

“I was.” She said, “I stopped playing professionally when I graduated from Starfleet academy.”

“Mmm.” He placed the photo back on the shelf and turned to look at the tools. He knew the only thing worse than finding any interest in her would be for her to become aware of it. He watched her as she checked each tool carefully and he suddenly wondered just how he was going to go about doing this. It wasn’t that the procedure was incredibly difficult, it would just be very… exposing. As his mind suddenly envisioned all that was required, he recoiled from it. He did not want her to see him as a machine, as some mechanical device like the power replays they fixed. He did not want her to see past his human façade at all.

Why the hell should I care!

But he did.

Hall tried to stifle a deep yawn as she set the last tool down on the glossy black top of the desk. “I…eh… I think I have everything.”

“You’re tired.” He said.

“I didn’t sleep well last night.” She said with a shrug.

“Crusher could give you something to make you sleep.” He suggested. Maybe she’ll do that. Maybe she’s too tired to help me….

Hall shook her head. “I don’t have trouble sleeping. It just wasn’t very… restful. Dreams.”

While he considered what that could mean he simultaneously planned the procedure with each minor step. She was a few inches shorter than him, and it would be easier for her to work if he were seated. Lore pulled out the chair from the desk and sat sideways so that his shoulder would be accessible to her. There was something about the whole situation that he did not like, but he fought to ignore the mounting unease threatened to break his calm façade. In a rush to begin things and throw his foreboding aside, he pulled his steel grey sweater over his head and tossed it across the
nearby armchair.

Hall gasped suddenly and lowered her eyes to the desktop. Even in the dim light Lore could see the pink flush in her cheeks as she rechecked the tools she had already checked twice, and tried to cover her embarrassment with a smile. Lore understood modesty, but he had been in such a rush to complete the repairs that it was only now at seeing her awkward reaction that he felt the unease from it.

She cleared her throat again and brushed her hair behind her ear. Some of the sudden discomfort had faded and she looked over the bare surface of his back with a thoughtful expression. “Where is it?”

He sat up straight and tried not to look so uncomfortable. “My left shoulder-blade. Just above and to the outside. Three of the servos there are damaged.” Hall stepped close to him and pressed her hand against the area. He could not resist a laugh and said, “You can’t feel it.”

“Oh.” She laughed a bit at herself and the pink of her cheeks intensified.

Lore closed his eyes as he spoke, for the hard part was coming. “There isn’t an entry point on my shoulder, so you’ll have to cut—.”

“Cut?” Her voice shook.

He turned to gauge her expression, “Can you do that?” He knew that some humans could not, and his human façade was very convincing. At least it was till now.

She nodded confidently, “Yes. I’m fine.”

“Just above and to the left.” He said again. When she did not move, he looked up, “You won’t hurt me.”

Lore turned away again and waited as Hall took a small tool with a clear glass tip and placed her other hand flat on his shoulder. He reminded himself that it could have been worse. She could have said no, a prospect that would have been utterly shattering for more than one reason, for there was something about Hall’s serene approach to remarkable situations that he found…reliable.

He heard the laser activate a second before it touched his skin and the sirens started. Only twice before in his life had he experienced it, and it grew no easier with the third. All other thoughts were trampled beneath it like whispers under a claxon, and for the briefest moment he forgot where he was. Even the date and time eluded him, and although it was but a moment, it was enough to break his calm exterior. Lore gasped.

The sirens stopped as Hall pulled back in shock. “It does hurt!” The cried, her eyes on him like an accusation.

Lore acknowledged his slip but decided to laugh rather than be embarrassed. “It’s not pain, per se.”

“Then why did you gasp, ‘per se’?” She countered.

He laughed again, for he could not decide whether she was angry or concerned. Still, how to explain? For a moment he considered not explaining at all, telling himself that it was none of her business, but another look told him that if he wanted cooperation he would have to say something, and he felt no particular inclination to hide anything. Odd.
“It’s not pain.” He repeated, “It’s…a distraction, a warning.”

“So is pain.”

He shook his head, “It’s not physical, it’s mental. Imagine a siren going off, it’s…distracting. It’s intended to alert me to damage.”

“Uh-huh.” She nodded and took a step toward him again. “Should I continue?”

“No other choice.” He said flatly and turned his head away again. She leaned closer this time, as if to work more carefully, and activated the drill again. The sirens were easier to suppress this time, but he was still relieved when she deactivated the laser and placed it back in the tool box. He knew what it must look like, for he had done similar operations on his arm in the past, but he was far more curious to know what she was thinking. What she amazed? Repulsed? Lore turned his head just enough to watch her face.

It was a flat mask of concentration, then, “Oh. I see.” She pulled back to take a longer look at his now opened shoulder.

“You see what?” He said, guarded.

“I can see two small round panels. One of them is…eh…buckled up, broken.”

Lore smiled at the ease in her voice, but his suspicion crushed it immediately. Was she so calm because his machine nature did not disturb her, or was she so calm because he was merely a machine like every other one she had worked with? He rejected the idea, reminding himself that he was being too critical. For crying out loud! He was becoming a neurotic, just like the rest of those humans! “Open the broken panel. You should see three small servos, two centimeters in length. One of them may be crushed.”

She retrieved a tiny tweezer-like instrument from the box and leaned close to him again, her eyes but inches from his shoulder. “All right. I see it. One of them is crushed.”

He sighed, for that would only make the entire affair last longer, and each moment she stood over his exposed state—in both senses—drove him further into discomfort. He continued, “You’ll have to remove the two, and pick out the crushed servo.”

“Mmm.” She nodded and leaned closer, “A lot of very tiny pieces.” She mused as she rested her wrist against his back and began to pick tiny bits of shattered polymer and glass from the open “wound” on his shoulder. Lore tried his best to ignore what was happening, to simply think about something else until the whole thing could be done with, but his alternate trains of thought weren’t much help. Why did she like reading Edith Wharton? Did she still play the piano or had she stopped entirely? If he was just a machine, why did she blush when he took his shirt off? Was the pleasant sunflower sent of her perfume intentional, or just some errant ingredient in her shampoo?

Nonsense!

“What do you take off your shoes?” He belted suddenly.

Hall’s subtle movements stopped, “What do you mean?”

“In the Jefferies tubes, you always take off your shoes when we start working. Why?” He couldn’t believe the idiocy of his own question, and turned away to cringe.

“Oh!” She laughed and continued her meticulous labor again, “It’s more comfortable. I find it
hard to move around in boots because they restrict my ankles.”

Lore frowned. Physical comfort! He should have been able to guess that himself. As the room filled with stubborn silence once more, he could hear nothing but the slow ebb of her breathing and the nervous clip of her heart. As she leaned closer to see something in particular, her hair slipped from behind her ear and fell against his shoulder. She did not seem to notice, and continued silently. It was strange, but her dutiful silence bothered him. She should not be so in control, for he had slipped already several times to speak to her. Why should she be so much more resilient?

*Maybe she has no questions.*

“You can ask me a question.” He said, his tone as dead as he could make it.

“Oh?” She said and stopped working long enough to pull her head around to look at him. “What if you don’t want to answer?”

He shrugged, “I won’t.”

“Fair enough.” She turned back to her task and considered, “Why are you here?”

“Why are any of us here?” He taunted out of habit.

“Mmm…I mean, why are you on this ship?”

He considered not answering, but there was a safe enough reply, “I didn’t have a choice.” Hall raised a skeptical brow at him, and he frowned back at her. “Fine. I had nowhere else to go.”

Hall looked away, suddenly embarrassed by her probing, and focused back on his shoulder. “‘There’s a thin gold wire that crosses under the servos, and some of the fragments are stuck under it. Can I break it to get them?’

“That’s a primary data link, so…no.” He almost smiled at his own attempt to sound calm.

She bent her head around to face him, “What would happen if I did?”

Lore made a wry smile, “If you do, we’ll have to remove my entire arm to fix it.”

“Oh.” Hall breathed with wide eyes and cast her attention back to the tiny fragments and the very unbreakable gold wire. After several more minutes of silent work, she set the small tweezers on the table with a clink. “All right. I’ve removed all three.”

Lore attempted to move his fingers, but was entirely unable to now. “You just have to replace them now.”

She nodded and opened a separate compartment of the tool box where a series of tiny servos lay in need rows. As she compared the damaged servos she had just removed to the potential replacements, Lore watched a subtle, almost mischievous grin form her lips. “You can ask me a question.” She said.

He laughed in spite of himself. If her discomfort was still there, she was doing a fine job of hiding it, but why offer to answer a question? Did she think he found her interesting? He sighed, for he had asked her about her shoes.

“Why did you volunteer to work with me?”

She found a suitable match among the servos and placed three of them aside, “Why not?”
Lore gave her the same skeptical smirk that she had dealt him.

“Fine.” She said, mocking him. “I didn’t see any reason not to. I’m not afraid of you.”

“A lack of fear is rather passive.” He countered. “Volunteering for something that everyone else dreads is not.”

Hall shook her head in an amused fashion and took up one of the servos. As she leaned over him to replace the tiny object, she smiled, “I think that you’re trying to get me to admit that I was curious, and I’m trying to figure out whether or not you find that a flaw.”

The sheer honesty of her short speech impressed him enough to laugh, and what had started as an idle question became a burning curiosity. “Well?”

“I was curious.” She admitted.

“Ha! Figures.” He gloated.

“But I wasn’t afraid of you.” She said lightly and brushed yet another lock behind one ear. “Couldn’t see why anyone else was…. .”

“Really?” He said sarcastically, “I think you’re lying. I think you know exactly why people would—.”

“If you were going to destroy the ship you would have done it already.” She said flatly, “That is why I volunteered.”

Lore pursed his lips in a tight line and looked away from her. It was strange how even an unintentional reminder of his past struck him like a shock wave, blowing aside all of the present and leaving nothing but fully formed, picture perfect memories he would like to forget. Destroy the ship…. Why would he do that? Was that what everyone had been waiting for all this time, for him to attempt the mass murder of nine hundred people?

Why not? You did it before. Lore put his hand over his closed eyes.

“I’m sorry.” Hall said in a low voice and paused over his open shoulder. “I didn’t mean to imply that you would—.”

“Are you almost done?” He snapped, still looking away.

Hall paused long enough to draw a deep breath and sigh. Whatever she was thinking, it did not shake her composure. “Just one more.” After a few small connections were set in place and she settled the final servo into position, she stepped back from him with a hesitant face. “How will I… close this?”

He was still looking away and suddenly found himself dreading to turn toward her. She was helping him when she did not have to, and he knew it. He also knew that it was not like him to give a damn about such things, but Lore had not been ‘himself’ for quite some time.

“A dermal regenerator.” He replied wearily, and hoped that the change in his tone communicated some kind of contrition.

“Really?” She said with some surprise.

He shrugged, “Bioplast sheeting may not be skin, but it’s close enough.”
Hall dropped the small connecting tool into the box and walked across the room to the replicator. As she did, Lore heard her whisper softly to herself, “Amazing.”

A thought occurred to him at that moment, and it was one that would not go away despite his own effort. He turned toward her finally, “Will you answer another question?”

Hall came back around the desk with the dermal regenerator in her hand and a strange smile on her face. “Yes.”

“Will you tell me what you expected my arm to feel like?”

Hall’s smiled faded at once and her brow knitted into an anxious frown, “What if I don’t want to answer?”

He shrugged, “You won’t.”

She came to stand next to him again and pressed her hand over the long cut in his skin, closing it together under her fingers. “Well, I wasn’t entirely honest when I said it wasn’t what I expected. See, I thought my expectations were wrong when they turned out to be correct. So, it actually turned out to be exactly what I expected.”

Lore shook with laughter and waved his hand over his head in a mocking gesture. “That makes perfect sense.”

Hall chuckled and activated the dermal regenerator. She ran it slowly over the cut as she slid her hand along the newly mended skin, feeling it. “What I mean is, I expected you to feel human, and I was right.”

He gave her a sidelong stare, “That’s what you expected? You didn’t expect me to be…cold? Hard?” His voice was thick with amazement, for it truly did make him wonder.

She shook her head at him, “Oh, that makes perfect sense.”

He managed not to smile despite his relief. She wasn’t upset with him, or at least did not appear to be, and for whatever bizarre reason he could not fathom, that pleased him. She finished with the regenerator and set it on the desk next to the tool box as she took a few steps back. Lore flexed his fingers several times and stood, moving his arm above his head in a circular motion.

“Good as new.” She said as she took a long appraisal of him, but after a moment she let her eyes fall away as if something had occurred to her.

Lore suddenly thought about the fact that he was still naked from the waist up, and grabbed his shirt off the chair. Pulling it on quickly, he stepped away from the desk and around her toward the center of the room. When he had decided to come there in his quick, thoughtless way, he had given no thought to thanking her or in any other way showing gratitude for her help. But now as he stood ready to leave, the idea of doing or saying nothing was so rude that it was offensive even to his blunted sense of decorum.

“Thanks.” He muttered and took his few short strides to the door.

“Lore?” She said quickly.

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”
“For what?”

“The shuttle bay.” She replied, “You were—well, thank you.”

Lore looked away quickly, for receiving gratitude was almost as difficult as giving it, “We’re even, then.”

She scoffed, “Hardly.” But upon seeing his discomfort, she continued, “Good night.”

Lore turned quickly into the corridor without another word, but when he did not hear her door close after him, he looked back. She stood in the doorframe with a curious expression, cautious.

“Will you be in engineering tomorrow?” She asked with a calm tilt of her head.

He had not planned on it. He had not planned on anything beyond that moment. He shrugged.

“I would prefer it.” She said simply.

He nodded slowly, mindlessly, in stark wonder at how any creature could be so unusually accommodating. Strange thing was, he actually believed her.

She gave a satisfied nod, “Good. See you tomorrow.”

Lore turned, and with quick steps made his way to the turbo lift. As he waited for its arrival, a smile crossed his lips.
Chapter 12

“\textit{The Boogey Man doesn’t have life signs.}”

“I am unconvinced.” Data shook his head as his eyes ran over the blurring text that moved across the screen.

“But?” Geordie probed, and although he did not expect Data to say more he thought there was more to be said.

Data pressed a few controls quickly and stopped the screen, “I am glad that Lore’s presence on the \textit{Enterprise} has not been very disruptive. I am also pleased that he has shown no desire to harm the ship or the crew, but I still find myself unwilling to trust him, or to encourage anyone else to do so.”

Geordie sighed, “Trust me, Data, there aren’t very many objecting to that. I just wish you wouldn’t worry so much about it. It can’t be healthy.”

“Geordie, I do not have physiological responses to stress as humans do.”

“That might have worked with Dr. Crusher, but it isn’t working with me. I think everyone can relax, at least a bit.”

Data had to admit Geordie was right, even if his words were not entirely accurate. Data did not suffer from physical illnesses due to stress, but he knew it had been affecting him in other ways. Several days before, an officer from engineering had asked him if he knew how long Lore would be onboard. His response had been a terse ‘no’, and the incident had immediately amazed him. He was never short with others or impolite and he did not like the change in himself.

He focused back on the conversation, “Has the crew in engineering ‘relaxed’?”

Now it was Geordie’s turn to sigh, “Not exactly. I mean, the stress level has gone down, but that’s only because no one has to worry about working with him. He won’t.”

“Does he still not speak to anyone?” Data asked for the tenth time in a week.

Geordie shook his head. “Except for yes and no.”

“But he speaks to Lt. Hall?” Data said, almost hopefully.

Geordie shrugged, “Maybe. That’s the general assumption.”

Data tilted his head, “Assumption? You do not know?”

It wasn’t the first time Geordie had been laid siege by Data’s worried questions, for although his friend was unendingly worried and curious about Lore’s activities in engineering, he did almost everything he could to avoid Lore himself. Geordie sighed and pressed several controls on his console, “I’ve never seen them talk. I give Hall her engineering assignment and Lore goes with her. They usually work alone.” He thought for a moment, “I can’t imagine what they would have to talk
about anyway. What would Hall of all people have in common with Lore?”

Data continued the streaming text on the screen, but his eyes fell away from it, distracted. “I do not know.” He replied, “I… I do not know very much about Lore.”

“What?” Geordie said, turning fully away from his screen now.

“Geordie,” Data began, “do you believe that my decision to disassemble Lore was wrong?”

“Wrong? Data, he tried to kill you. He tried to kill us. And that’s just the one incident. Why would you think you had done something wrong?”

Data’s expression was serious, “I have asked myself if my actions would have been the same if Lore had been a human criminal, and I cannot say that they would have. I had already incapacitated Lore. He was no longer a threat. I did not have to—.”

“Data.” Geordie stopped him, “Don’t do this to yourself. In a perfect world, a human with Lore’s past might have been arrested, tried, sent to prison, but not in the real world. In the real world, the shot that brought Lore down would have killed a human.”

Data shook his head, his thoughts undeterred. “I cannot allow my estimation of my own actions to be based on a likely alternative outcome. I can only base them on what should have been the right outcome. Geordie, I do not believe that I should—.”

“Commander?”

Both Data and Geordie turned at the summons and looked up at Worf. He was frowning over his console in a way that indicated no good news.

“I have attempted to transmit docking procedures to the science station for our arrival.” Worf reported, “There has been no response. I have tried multiple frequencies.”

Geordie turned to Data, “Our supply run has been scheduled for weeks. If they were going to conduct any communications maintenance, they would have told us.”

Data stood quickly and moved to his place at the Captain’s chair, “Increase to warp seven and continue to hail the station, all frequencies.” By the armrest display on the Captain’s chair Data drew up the full schematics and mission profile of the Corona Six research station, the remote observatory to which they had been on route for hours. It was small for a station, roughly a quarter the size of the Enterprise, and had a total crew compliment of only four researchers and one engineer. The bulk of the funnel-shaped station housed the massive inertial dampeners and shield emitters used to protect the station from the harsh environment of the pulsar it orbited.

Little more than twenty minutes passed when Worf reported, “Coming into visual range. Should I inform the Captain?”

“Not yet.” Data replied, “It is possible that their failure to return our hails may be a technical error.”

“Aye, Sir. In visual range now.”

The cascading starscape vanished as the view screen magnified, bringing the striking blue-white light of the pulsar into the room. While many on the bridge squinted at the washed-out dot in the center of the screen, Data could see clearly the alarming sight of a station adrift. The Corona Six station maintained no galactic positioning, and spun end over end in a strange orbit.
“Maximum magnification.” Data instructed. The image zoomed forward, and curious expressions on the bridge took on a stern disapproval, for all could see what Data already knew. Not only was the station clearly adrift, there were obvious gaping wounds on its exterior where it appeared that sections of it had been carved out. The station turned slowly, allowing the crew to see the port side and the wide open doors of the main hangar bay.

Data tapped his combadge, “Data to Captain Picard. Sir, please report to the bridge.”

There was hardly a pause, “On my way, Mr. Data.”

Data turned to the young man at ops and spoke hopefully, “Life signs?”

“None, Sir.”

Data lowered his eyes for only a moment before forcing them back to the screen. He was a Starfleet officer, and as such maintained the exterior calm required of him, but there were times when he suspected that such control was harder for him than for others. His fellow crewmen were emotional beings too, but they had had decades to perfect the art of composure, that flat pond that covers the rip currents beneath. In the first year of his emotion chip being activated, such news as the likely death of six people would have been like a crushing shock, forcing him to deactivate his emotion chip within minutes. But that was a long time ago now and he had discarded that crutch, for he had learned that to take the good without the bad was to take nothing.

After a few minutes, the turbo lift doors hissed open and Picard entered the bridge. His expression already held the gravity of the situation, for Data never called him off shift without the best of reasons.

“Report.” Picard said as he moved toward the center and looked on the viewscreen.

Data stood, “Sir, the station has returned none of our hails and we detect no life signs.”

“Mr. Worf, any other ships in the area?”

“None within sensor range.” Worf reported.

Data relieved the ensign at ops and initiated a series of scans, for the sight of the Corona Six station’s open hanger bay left him with a horrible suspicion.

“What kind of research--.”

“Captain.” Data interrupted. The tone of his voice drew Picard’s immediate attention and he approached him. “Sensors detect no energy readings from the station. None.”

“No residual signatures?” Picard took a step toward the screen, “Even if the station lost main power, the core would still emit some latent energy readings.”

“It would be the case, Sir, but the core is gone.” He looked up at the dark cloud that passed over Picard’s eyes and continued, “And that is not the only thing. The last positioning report sent by the station indicated their calculations for a stable orbit around the pulsar, but it is currently not in the correct orbit.”

“Can you account for the change?” Picard asked, stepping closer still to the view screen.

Data nodded, “The station has lost more than twenty-three percent of its total recorded mass. The core alone accounted for seven percent of the total.”
“It’s been gutted like a fish!” Worf proclaimed.

Picard walked back to his seat and pressed the comm., “All senior officers report to the bridge. Mr. Data, do you have any theories?”

Data glanced at the object on the screen, for the term station no longer truly applied to it. “The recorded mass of the station was exact due to the precarious nature of its orbit. Since the exterior damage alone would not account for the percentage loss, I would surmise that Worf is correct, Sir.”

Picard’s eyes flashed to the screen again, “With zero energy readings I suspect we won’t be just casually dropping in.” Picard turned as the lift doors opened and Riker entered the bridge, “How up to date is your zero-G training, number one?”

Riker frowned, “Current, unfortunately.”

“Mr. Data will bring you up to speed.”

The years of working together had fostered a silent understanding among the bridge crew so precise that it hardly required a look. Data stood and walked toward the lift just before Worf joined them. The Klingon’s brow was knitted in stern anxiety, for it was no secret how he felt about space walks.

“Look on the bright side, Worf.” Riker smiled as the doors hissed shut, “At least there won’t be any Borg this time.”

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Data activated several light wands and released them into the black vacuum. The harsh blue light cast floating rays over the dark walls, creeping over them like specters.

“Everyone doing okay?” Riker’s voice flowed through the comm system of their environmental suits, and each flashed their lights on one another to make sure all was well. They each wore the standard zero-G environmental suit, a light grey, rubbery garment with a bulky fit and high chin helmet that forced everyone to keep their face unnaturally upturned. Even Data, who knew no such thing as discomfort, appeared as if he would rather be elsewhere.

Riker glanced at Data with a short smile, “Wishing you had opted out of the suit, Data?”

Data shook his head, although the bulk of the suit barely transferred the motion, “I would not have been able to communicate, Commander. Although, I can…imagine how uncomfortable it would be.”

“You have no idea.” Worf grumbled.

“All right.” Riker continued, “I want to circle the main deck and meet in the control center. Usual comm protocols apply, we’ll be on channel two. Worf, you’re with me.”

Data and Geordie nodded and turned to face the black length of the corridor. Their steps were slow and heavy, the awkward result of walking in gravity boots, and they shined their lights in slow sweeps over the unfinished walls. The station was utilitarian in nature, much of the piping
and other access ports running exposed along the ceiling. Geordie swatted at one of the light wands to send it further ahead. It struck the wall and floated around the corner.

“There’s just something creepy about it.” Geordie mused. “I think it’s the silence of a vacuum that gets me.”

Data considered the vibration as his heavy magnetic boots fixed another step on the deck. “I did not think that silence was considered particularly ominous. It has been my experience that in literature feelings of foreboding are often associated with particular sounds, such as approaching footsteps, or the creak of a door hinge.”

Geordie laughed, “yeah, maybe in literature. But silence…that means you can’t hear anything coming.”

Data consulted his tricorder, “There are no life signs aboard.”

Geordie smiled at his friend through the glare of his face shield. “Come on, Data. You know the boogeyman doesn’t have life signs.”

Data gave Geordie an amused look and continued to run his flashlight over the walls in front of them. “The main laboratory should be just around the corner. From here there should be no more separating corridors.”

“Mmm….” Geordie considered the walls around him, “I’m glad Starfleet abandoned this design. It’s efficient, but not very convenient. I mean, you have to interrupt everyone just to pass to the next room.”

“Spatial designs that do not separate rooms with corridors are often found in use by species that do not consider personal privacy to be very—” Data stopped his flashlight on the room they had just entered and frowned at what he saw. The far wall was a dark blemish marked with disconnected cables and broken fixtures. He ran his light to the floor where the mark continued, a near perfect outline of the equipment that had once been there.

“This is the main lab.” Geordie confirmed as he too ran a sharp beam of light through the black void. The walls of the large room were all a jumbled mess of hastily cut and torn connectors. Geordie flinched back as a spindly chair suddenly floated close, tapping his face plate.

“What the hell happened here? All the equipment is gone.”

Data lifted his tricorder, “According to the current schematics of this station, the primary data transfer block should be directly behind this bulked. We may be able to download the last internal scans.” He crossed to the wall and fixed his tricorder and flashlight to his belt. The panel dislodged easily under Data’s force and he pushed it away.

“Well, no hope there.” Geordie frowned at the dark, empty space that should have contained a data transfer block nearly six feet tall and three feet wide. Once more, the attaching connectors hung lose like the limbs of some mangled creature.

“Geordie,” Data said as he took his flashlight up again, “If the station’s loss in mass is a reflection of its equipment loss, we would have to assume that transport signatures—” Data turned as he spoke, the sharp beam of his flashlight illuminating only what fell before it. The gray, cracked face of a human corpse floated not a foot from his face.

“Agh!” Data pulled back, attempting to escape, but his mag-boots did not cooperate with his speed. He clenched his eyes shut and waved his hands. The flashlight spun away and bathed the
grotesque corpse in a violent swath of light.

Data gasped again and turned his face down. He closed his eyes against the irrational panic, for his mind told him there was no reason to be afraid, yet something very different told him to run.

“Data!” Geordie called and shined his flashlight through the black chaos. The body drifted high to the ceiling, forcing Geordie to duck under its sprawling legs so he could come to his friend’s side. Data was standing still and upright, for there was no other choice in zero gravity. But his eyes were still clenched shut, and held both fists tight and close. “Data, are you all right?”

“I am sorry, Geordie.” Data strained, his eyes still closed. “I did not mean to panic.”

“Hey, you’re only human, right?” Geordie said as he captured Data’s escaped flashlight. “Are you really okay, Data? Are you…do you think you should deactivate your emotion chip?”

No. Data lowered his hands to his sides and opened his eyes, “No, Geordie. I will be fine. Thank you.”

Okay.” Geordie said hesitantly and took a few steps back to look at the body above. It had come to a slow drift against the ceiling with its face down. Data forced his eyes up and was relieved when his composure did not break. He took a deep breath, for his emotions sometimes forced such unnecessary actions, and tapped his combadge.

“Data to Commander Riker. Sir, we have discovered a body in the main science lab.

“You’re not the only one, Data.” Came Riker’s weary reply, “We have three here in the control center. Can you speculate on a cause of death?”

Data examined the body again. It was a man, although the severe disfigurement to his face caused by exposure excluded a guess at age. He wore a Starfleet issue environmental suit minus the helmet. When Data attempted to use his tricorder to read for toxicology, the instrument did not respond.

“The pulsar’s radiation field is interfering with tricorders.” Data said almost absently as he continued to stare up.

“But visual inspection alone suggests that this man died of exposure to a vacuum.” Geordie supplied.

Data looked up now, aware of his preoccupation, and was embarrassed. It had been nearly six years since he had first activated his emotion chip, and still there were moments when he could not rein it in.

“It looks almost the same here.” Riker replied, “They may have been attempting to reach the escape pods, but they couldn’t beat the sudden decompression. We’re going to check the escape pods.”

“Sir.” Data said, resolved that he was now all right, “if the pattern we have seen here is consistent, I would surmise that the escape pods are gone.”

“Gone?”

“Yes, Sir, as well as every other piece of useful equipment.”

A long, agitated sigh came through the comm. “I was hoping that wasn’t the case on your side.”
This place has been stripped to the bone. The computers, tool lockers...they even took the CO2 scrubbers right out of the wall. Transport the body to sickbay and meet us in the control center. Maybe we'll get some answers there.”

“Aye, Sir.” Data tapped his badge closed and retrieved a transporter tag from his utility belt. He only hesitated a moment, then placed the tag on the body above him. The body drifted away before disappeared in the blue haze of the transporter beam.

They left the empty room and headed for the control center.

There was silence for more than a minute while Data reflected—or ‘harped’, as Geordie would say — on his embarrassment.

“I am sorry, Geordie.” He said again, “My reaction was not behavior becoming a Starfleet officer.”

“Data….” Geordie sighed heavily, “You need to be a little easier on yourself. Anyone would have had a serious reaction. I would have if I hadn’t seen it coming.”

“You are attempting to make me feel better.”

Geordie laughed a bit, “Yeah, Data. I am. But that doesn’t make it untrue. You’ve come a long way. It’s not as if this is Belok Three again.”

Data glanced soberly at his friend, “No. It is not.” Data fell silent again as he recalled the unpleasant events on Belok Three. It had been a former Cardassian space station that fell into Federation hands under the Cardassian-Federation treaty, only to be taken by force when the dominion war broke out. The new inhabitants, colonists mostly, were taken prisoner by Cardassian forces for over a year until the Enterprise and several others liberated the station. What they had found there was….Data did not like to think about it. All of the men and children had been killed, and the women had been kept in deplorable conditions, severely mistreated. After only a few hours of searching the station for all the prisoners, Data had come across a Cardassian Captain hiding in a storage locker. Needless to say, Data’s greeting had been less than kind, and the official report called it ‘unnecessary force’.

He looked up, actually feeling a little better, “I do not regret my actions on Belok Three.”

Geordie nodded, “Good.”

They crossed yet another stripped room, so bare that its actual purpose was hard to figure, and came to the control center. The harsh blue-white light of the pulsar filled the room and Data’s suit announced an unsafe increase in radiation exposure.

Riker turned in their direction, covering his eyes, “Yeah, I know. We can’t stay here long.”

Geordie immediately moved toward a chair that was drifting across the room, virtually the only item left, and held his tricorder to it. “Commander. With the station’s shields down, everything here is getting a pretty high dose of stellar bombardment, but this chair is still relatively sound. If I had to guess, I’d say the shields on this station couldn’t have been down more than…six hours.”

“The last communication we had with the station was eight hours ago.” Said Worf, and his tone suggested his suspicions.

“What the hell happened here?” Said Riker, “How could anyone strip an entire space station in that kind of time?”
“There is transporter technology that allows objects to be tagged on site.” Data noted, “The Tal’Shiar would often fabricate public executions by using disruptor blasts to mask transporter beams.”

Riker nodded, “So, fire at something, and instead of being disintegrated it’s just transported to a predetermined location. That might explain the basic how, but it doesn’t explain why the station appears to have sustained no external damage from an assault or why we never received a distress signal.”

“Enterprise to away team.”

Riker tapped his badge, “Go ahead, Captain.”

“One of the station’s escape pods just appeared on sensors with one life sign aboard. Maybe we’ll get some answers after all.”

“Understood, Sir. Riker out.” He took a last long look at the barren, sun-bleached room, “Let’s get the hell out of here.”
Chapter 13

“I thought you were…someone else.”

The man sat on the edge of the bio-bed with his eyes half closed and his elbows resting on his knees. He looked as if he might collapse and roll off of the table any moment, for he seemed to slump forward with each exhausted breath.

“What is your name?” Crusher asked slowly as she pressed a hypospray to his arm.

The man sat back and winced at some pain in his back. “Narok Reed.”

Crusher made a curious face as she looked over her tricorder, but her bed-side manner was impeccable. “Narok….That’s a Vulcan name, isn’t it?”

“Half Vulcan, actually.” He grunted as he readjusted his seating on the bed. “Thanks for coming by. I’m not sure how much longer I could have made it in that pod. It was getting pretty rough.”

Riker, who was standing a few feet away, gave Crusher a thoughtful look. He was not like any Vulcan either of them had ever met. Unlike the usually sober, monochrome costumes of Vulcans in general, Reed wore a thick green vest over a worn brown tunic, both high-neck but left unbuttoned below the throat. His heavy blue cargo pants were tucked into a pair of scuffed brown boots.

“Narok,” Riker began.

“Reed, please.” He interjected as he finally sat up straight, “I’m half Vulcan, but never really took to it.”

Riker nodded, “Mr. Reed, then. You’re not a member of the Corona Six crew. How did you get out here?” Riker watched, as he was trained to do, for any subtle change in the man’s face. Of course, Troi would get far more than he would.

Reed ran his fingers roughly through his disheveled black hair, which was remarkably grey in some places despite his apparent youth. “My shuttle. I was having some serious mechanical problems and that station was the closest thing around, so I asked if I could dock for repairs.” He scoffed bitterly, “Guess I would have been better off on my own, huh?” Another weary pass through his hair revealed the pointed tips of Vulcan ears.

Riker glanced at Troi for any sign, but she had very little on her intent face. He turned back, “Can you tell us what happened out there?”

Reed gave Riker a curious look, “Sounds to me like you already know something I don’t.”

“The station’s crew is dead.”

“Eh…dead?” Reed shook his head a few times, “I…they were fine when I left. I mean….” He seemed to notice now the serious slate of Riker’s face, and he patted his thighs in a nervous attempt at self calm, “I was there a few hours. One of them—Marshall—was helping me with my repairs when….Well, the station went nuts.”
Riker glances at Troi, eyes wide, “Nuts? What do you mean?”

“First the inertial dampeners went off-line, and we thought we would be shaken to death. After that it was one thing after another. Power fluctuated, then gravity plates went off-line, came back on-line. If you want to torture someone, that’s the way to do it!”

Troi looked up as the sickbay doors opened. Captain Picard and Data approached as Reed paused to gather his thoughts.

“They were scrambling around,” Reed continued, “trying to figure out what was going on, but you couldn’t really get anywhere or do anything. The life support went.” He shuddered and stretched his back again.

Data stepped forward, still behind Reed’s back, “Failure of the support system would explain why the crew attempted to secure environmental suits.”

Reed turned slowly to look at Picard and Data, an odd frown on his face as if he had heard something that confused him. His eyes passed Picard and rested on Data. In a sudden rush of horror that only Troi could appreciate, Reed’s eyes flew wide with panic and he leapt forward off the bed.

“Mr. Reed!” Picard said at once, hands up as he stepped in front of Data. “Sir, this is Commander Data.”

Reed gasped as if his chest would collapse and struggled for a few deep breaths. He did not step back toward the bed. “You’re eh…Right. That’s right. Of course.” He looked from face to face before looking furtively at Data again. “I thought you were…well, that other one. Lore.”

Data closed his eyes for a moment and nodded, showing he was not offended. It was not the first time such a thing had happened, and he knew it would not be the last. Reed walked back to the edge of the bio-bed without sitting and touched his finger tips lightly together as if he were trying to concentrate on something. He noticed Picard’s curious look and made a nervous laugh. “Sorry, Captain. A little stress relieving trick. I guess I can’t completely avoid being a Vulcan.”

“What else can you tell us, Mr. Reed? How is it that you managed to get off the station before life support failed?”

“They sent me.” Reed said with an exasperated toss of his hand. “I begged them to come too, but they said they would find out what was happening. Said they would fix everything and retrieve me later.” He looked away, “They only had five suits. I went out in the escape pod, but whatever was happening to the station must have got to the pods too. I couldn’t send a subspace message or activate the thrusters. I couldn’t even maintain an all stop! But…but I saw the other ship.”

Crusher returned again with another hypospray and pressed it to Reed’s neck. “That should help with the CO2 toxicity.” She said, “A bit longer and you would have passed out.”

“Thanks.” He mumbled and gave another quick glance at Data.

“What else can you tell us, Mr. Reed? How is it that you managed to get off the station before life support failed?”

“They sent me.” Reed said with an exasperated toss of his hand. “I begged them to come too, but they said they would find out what was happening. Said they would fix everything and retrieve me later.” He looked away, “They only had five suits. I went out in the escape pod, but whatever was happening to the station must have got to the pods too. I couldn’t send a subspace message or activate the thrusters. I couldn’t even maintain an all stop! But…but I saw the other ship.”

Crusher returned again with another hypospray and pressed it to Reed’s neck. “That should help with the CO2 toxicity.” She said, “A bit longer and you would have passed out.”

“Thanks.” He mumbled and gave another quick glance at Data.

“Another ship?” Picard crossed his arms.

“Yeah, yeah.” Reed continued, animated now. “I’d never seen a ship like it before; I couldn’t even place the origin of the design. But it just hung in a close orbit on the station. I never saw a shot fired, but —” He shook his head, confounded. “I saw them take the deflector dish with their tractor beam, and a few other outer components. They took my ship, my ship, right out of the shuttle bay with their damn tractor beam!”
Data took his opportunity as a bystander to watch Troi, for years of watching Captain Picard had taught him the value of expressions. As always, Troi’s face was still and intent. She hardly ever let on that she was reading a person.

“Did the crew mention anything about recent visitors to the station?” Picard asked, “Or while you were there?”

Reed shook his head, “Sorry, Captain. I just don’t know what happened out there.”

Picard dropped his arms to his side and appraised the man one last time. “Seeing as how you find yourself rather stranded, Mr. Reed, where were you on route to before you engine troubles?”

Reed rubbed his eyes wearily. “I was going to Sayul Nor Station. Just passing through.” His insistence and the name of the station turned some heads. Sayul Nor, the former Cardassian station ceded to the Federation during the treaty negotiations, was a notorious outpost of criminals and anti-federation sentiment and was hardly the kind of place people casually visited.

Picard nodded finally, bringing the interrogation to an end. “Thank you, Mr. Reed. As soon as Dr. Crusher declares you fit, someone will escort you to a guest quarters.”

“Thanks, Captain. Oh, would you mind if I use a terminal. I’d like to send a subspace message.”

Picard looked at him.

“I want my son to know I’m alright. He was expecting me.” Reed added quickly, his eyes all pleading.

Picard nodded and walked toward the door, Troi and Data behind him.

“Counselor?” He said as soon as they were in the corridor.

Troi nodded a few times at her own thoughts, but did not look pleased with them. “Very little, Sir.”

His pace slowed, “How’s that?”

“His emotions are like very distant noises. They are there, but so muffled and buried that I can barely hear them.”

“I have heard other empaths describe their perceptions of Vulcans in a similar manner.” Data supplied.

“Yes, and I am used to sensing the Vulcan members of the crew, but this was…odd. He appeared to be emotional. He himself admitted that he does not follow the Vulcan life-style, and yet I sensed nothing more from him than I would have from the most disciplined full Vulcan.”

Picard stopped, “You think it was a show?”

Troi shook her head, “I can’t say that for sure, Captain. Vulcans have incredibly intense emotions when they are not controlled. Even if he does not adhere to Vulcan practices, he may still practice their emotional suppression techniques just to have some peace.”

“Mmm.” Picard drew a deep breath, “Understood. It’s a three days journey to Sayul Nor. See if you can’t talk to him again, Counselor.” He turned to Data, “I want you to a send a priority one communiqué to all nearby outposts and stations. Tell them to report if they see any unidentifiable
“Aye, Sir.” Data nodded, “Captain, Sayul Nor is a known focal point for black market activity. It is quite possible that equipment taken from the Corona Six station would be sold there.”

He nodded to both of them, but Troi was clearly thinking something new. “Another thing, Captain.” She said, “There was a moment during the interview when I could very distinctly sense Reed’s emotions. It was just for a few seconds, but…he was truly distressed when he saw Data. He was terrified.”

Data lowered his eyes briefly, for they knew almost as well as he the fine legacy Lore had wrought. The list of civilians as well as Starfleet officers who found his presence truly uncomfortable was much longer than he cared to think of.

“Unfortunately, Counselor, that is understandable.” Said Picard.

Troi nodded, sensing mild anger and embarrassment from Data, and parted ways at the junction in the corridor. As they parted ways and Data proceeded to the bridge to perform his duties, a heavy sense of resentment dampened his spirits. Data had never been a complainer or one to bemoan his circumstances. Even when he was fighting for his life, for the very right to exist as a person, he had not succumbed to self pity—a mild accomplishment, considering that he did not have emotions at the time—but now he felt the heavy burden of mistreatment. He did not deserve this. He did not deserve to have his name and very being marked forever by strangers because of Lore’s heinous crimes. As if such a thing were even possible, Data began to hate his brother even more.
Chapter 14

“You humans….You’re such masochists.”

Hall’s voice echoed down the dull expanse of the Jeffries’s tubes. The honeycomb structure of the connecting passageways and the bare vibrating metal confused the sounds until it seemed to come from everywhere. Of course, Lore could have found her easily had he not already known where she was. He crawled down the length of the tube with a replacement power relay in his hand as he continued to listen to Hall’s full, melodic humming. A short grin crossed his lips. So this was what she did when she was alone? She sang to herself.

But that was not the only source of his satisfied grin.

He had gone back to engineering to retrieve the replacement relay without Hall, and the looks on their faces when he had appeared without her had been worth their weight in latinum! While their horror struck glances were ridiculously amusing, he still had to pay attention to the source of them. What kind of monster did they take him for, anyway? It wasn’t as if he had ever killed for fun or for no reason. Certainly not! Everything he had ever done had always been for the sake of his own advantage, and what possible advantage could be gained from harming the only human whose lengthy company he could tolerate?

The humming progressed now and her round voice added fuzzy lyrics in the way that humans do when they think no one was listening.

“...and she’s strong when the dreams come, ‘cuz they take her, cover herrrr….they are all overrr....”

Still, he did not know the song, but made a mental note to check the lyrics against the ship’s computer later. He wasn’t sure why he should care, but it would give him something to do later. He stopped at the turn in the tube and looked around the corner. A few meters down Hall sat with her legs underneath her, her hands working intently in the open panel. Oblivious to him, she continued to hum and sing lazily.

“…how can you staaay out-side? There’s a beautiful mess in-siiide…”

He began crawling toward with no attempt to alert her beforehand. When she noticed him, she didn’t jump with surprise, but rolled her eyes at herself and smiled.

“I finished isolating this junction, so we can go ahead.” She said simply.

He nodded. After their short conversation in her quarters last week, it had seemed a bit ridiculous to attempt a return to their former strict silence. Although his words were still few, for he was still sure there was nothing to say, he no longer felt much irritation when she spoke. Hall was safe.

They had been working with little interruption for nearly five hours in the dim, cramped space. Hall pulled as elastic band from her hair and shook her head a few times to let the thick waves fall over her shoulders. She ran her fingers through it a few times, messaging her scalp, before bundling it back up into a lose bun.
Lore watched her as he lifted the new relay into position. He had become accustomed to her human gestures. Often she would pull her hair down and immediately gather it up again, retrieving the lose locks as she did, and so he hardly noticed. Of course, he did notice sometimes, such as that morning at the maintenance meeting. After the assignments had been given, a particularly large lock of loose red curls had irritated Anna’s cheek, and she tossed her hair down to bundle it up again. Lore had been in the perfect position to watch Larson, who appeared to halt all action and rational thought when Anna performed this innocent maneuver.

Lore’s usual reaction to humans was indifference, but he was sure he did not like Lt. John Larson. Not at all.

“So, are you going to tell me?” Hall asked with a smirk.

“Tell you what?” he said.

She cocked her head to one side, “Whether or not they’ve started the search for my dead body. Since you came back with the relay, I’ll guess not.”

Lore was aghast, but when she started to laugh and shake her head at the ridiculous idea, he saw the humor. “Probably not, but they might if you don’t make an appearance soon.” He smiled at the absurdity and her casual acceptance of it. Of course, there was a part of him that did not find the joke funny at all. The faces that haunted him reminded him of why it was not funny, why it was very much a not a joke. Of course, they had not bothered him very much in weeks.

“Maybe I’ll just avoid main engineering this afternoon.” Her grim widened.

He locked the relay in place and began connecting the unit. “That should be easy. From here, we can go to deck three and handle the data distribution nodules — .”

“No, no.” She said quickly.

He paused, “Why not?”

“I didn’t eat breakfast this morning.”

Lore gave her a sarcastic stare, hardly seeing the point of the personal revelation.

Anna frowned, “I’m not lifting another tool box until I eat something. I’m starving.” She returned his sarcastic stare, “You do know that humans eat, right?”

He fell back on his haunches, “Ah.” Usually their tasks were done by the mid-point of the day, and so he had never encountered this problem before. But, today they had taken on two separate assignments, which would call for a break.

His face was serious again, “An hour. I’ll meet you on deck three.” He began closing up the panel, a bit irritated, but Hall continued to watch him with her same undeterred smile.

“You could some with me.” She said, “That would be faster.”

He scoffed.

“A proposition, then? You go with me, twenty minutes. You don’t, and I’ll be sure to lose track of time.”

Lore narrowed his eyes at her, “Are you threatening me?”
She was not the least bit shaken and smiled broadly, “I believe it’s called strong-arming.”

He locked the tool box with a sharp snap. They never talked about him in any serious way, but Hall had already noticed that he was terribly impatient when it came to engineering tasks. He would work non-stop if LaForge would allow it.

“Fine.” He snapped and turned to crawl away. He knew she was still smiling in her triumph, which should have bothered him but really didn’t. He had concluded, weeks ago, that Hall’s lack of fear was something he liked. It was pleasant not having to worry that a harsh word or irritated glance would paralyze her.

They stored the tool kits in a locker in the junction room and Anna led the way into the corridor. Hall no longer slowed to walk next to him, for he now kept pace with her. He was still irritated by the attention he received whenever he passed people in the corridors, even though he had noticed the intensity lessening recently. Perhaps it had something to do with the way Anna made no issue of the company she kept. She smiled to crewman as they passed, waved to those she knew better, and all the while with Lore and his hard expression right next to her.

They were silent as they made their way to Ten Forward. A thick buzz of conversation flooded from the lunch time crowd. The room had undergone a stark change from the slow, casual atmosphere of breakfast. Throngs of people, standing and sitting, held animated conversations over colorful beverages. In the far corner a small group of Ferengi, economic diplomats that the Enterprise had been scheduled to take to a Federation negotiation, laughed over an improvised dabu table. As well as that disturbance, it appeared that a birthday party was also taking place.

Great….

He followed Anna reluctantly as she moved ahead to secure a table just being vacated. She fell thankfully into the chair and drew a knee up to her chest in a casual pose. She ran her eyes slowly over the boisterous room, her soft smile clearly showing that she approved of the crowd.

Lore fell into the chair and folded his arms across his chest. His posture and sour expression held all the signs of a sulking demeanor. If Anna noticed, she gave no sign, and continued to run her eyes over the room as if she were at a colorful zoo. Soon enough, an attendant came to the side of the table.

“What can I get for you?” The young woman spoke in a weak, distracted tone, for she kept darting her eyes at Lore.

Hall looked up to consider this very serious matter. “I’ll have strawberries with vanilla yogurt and…mmm…sponge cake.”

The attendant laughed, awkwardly, “Eh, desert for lunch. Got it. And…uh….” She turned reluctantly toward Lore and her nerves showed through her curious face.

Lore smirked over the young woman’s awkwardness, “Oh, please….”

The attendant scurried off through the crowd and Hall returned to her relaxed pose, although she was no longer watching the room. She left her eyes on the table, thoughtful. “Lore, do you eat?”

He also starred at the table. “No.”

“Really?”

“Really.” He retorted. “You know I don’t have to eat.”
Hall shrugged, “*Have* to, yes, but that doesn’t mean it’s out of the question. I understand that Commander Data eats sometimes.”

Lore sighed and looked away. Although his list of conversational restrictions was getting shorter for Hall, Data was still firmly at the top of that list. “When I feel like ingratiating myself to humans by imitating them, *then* I’ll start eating.” He sneered.

A deep sigh escaped her lips and she looked away. It was subtle, but Lore saw the disappointed way in which she shook her head and her eyes became distant. Lore lowered his eyes and tried to ignore the fresh sense of regret. It wasn’t as if he tried to be short or snarling with people, it was just…easier than controlling his emotions. Still, there was something about her downcast eyes and falling face that bothered him.

“I just never saw the point.” He supplied quickly, his tone a bit more civil.

Her smile did not return right away, but she engaged him, “Aren’t you curious? Do you think you would like anything?”

He shrugged dismissively, “I’m sure I would. *Certain* of it, in fact. But what would be the point in coming to like something you don’t need? Wouldn’t that just give you something to long for?”

“Of course. What’s wrong with that?” She stared at him as if she would see the answer on his face.

Lore shook his head sadly, “You humans….You’re such masochists.”

A quick burst of laughter escaped her, and it was loud enough to grab the attention of those at nearby tables. She covered her mouth quickly, but the grin was still there. “Then, you mean you’ve *never* eaten?”

He shook his head and actually enjoyed her sheer amazement. Considering the direction the conversation seemed to be taking, he decided to go ahead and answer the inevitable follow up questions. “I’ve never eaten, but there’s been a few interesting situations in which I had to drink.” He laughed at a distant memory, “I’ve even had to feign sleeping.”

The attendant returned and laid a bowl of perfectly red strawberries before Hall, along with a white square of sponge cake. The young woman was obviously trying not to look at Lore.

“Did you want anything to drink?” She asked.


He rolled his eyes and scowled, “Just eat.”

Anna made an exasperated sigh while the attendant, rather quickly, hurried off across the room. She dipped a strawberry into the yogurt and ate it thoughtfully. “You know,” She began, her voice cautiously low, “you really shouldn’t do that to people.”

“Do what?”

She dropped the strawberry leaves into the bowl, “Scare people.”

Lore’s posture stiffened, “If they’re afraid of me, it's their own problem. I don’t do anything.”
“You’re such a liar.”

“What?” He said through clenched teeth, starring her down.

She appeared to be entirely calm, and yet she was not looking at him, “I think you go out of your way to be nasty to people, and you know perfectly well that it takes very little for someone like you to frighten others.”

“Someone like me!” Android? Murderer? Which was she referring to? “It is not my responsibility to make people feel better about me.”

She looked at him sternly now, but he could hear the increased thump of her heart, “That’s odd. You seem to make sure they don’t all the time.”

His irritation was bordering on full anger now. Had he not been civil to her? Had he not gone out of his way to be as plain and passive and un-frightening in her presence as possible? What the hell more did she want! What did they all want! A new thought occurred to him suddenly, a horrible idea from the worst parts of himself. So, he wasn’t nice enough, was he?

He leaned over the table, “What’s my alternative, Hall? Should I be more like you?”

Anna frowned, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He starred at her with the meanest smirk he could manage, “Maybe I should be only accommodating. Maybe I should be so nice and sweet and approachable that absolutely no one has any idea what I really think about anything.”

“I do not —”

“—If I’m unapproachable, you’re too approachable. If you had the stomach to tell anyone what you really thought, perhaps you wouldn’t be everyone’s favorite lieutenant. Maybe if you told that idiot Larson what you really think of him, he wouldn’t stare at you all the time.”

She became very still with her eyes on the table, but Lore could see the heavy rise of her chest, “How would you know if what I say to people isn’t what I’m thinking? Do you read minds?”

He scoffed, “What you say can’t possibly be all you’re thinking. No one is that dull.” Lore nearly cringed at his own harsh words. He was working on bad assumptions made in the moment, and he knew it. He had no idea what she even said to her colleagues when he wasn’t there. But, his defenses were up, and the truth was a low priority when that happened.

She played distractedly with one of the strawberries and her breath was still unnaturally deep and heavy. After a moment, she brought a hand to her forehead and made as if to message her eyes. When she pulled her hand away, her eyes were a little redder and wetter. Her cheeks were crimson flushed.

Oh, shit. I’m sorry….

Anna stood up from her seat suddenly and stepped away from the table. Without looking at him, she said, “I think I want something other than water. Excuse me.”

Lore slumped in his seat and considered the possibility that he was among the worst people who had ever lived.

Anna stepped up to the bar quickly and rubbed at her face, trying to smooth the blood from
under her cheeks. “Guinan, can um…can I get some ginger ale, please.”

Guinan excused herself from the guests at the end of the bar and approached Anna thoughtfully. Her eyes darted over to Lore, then back to Anna. “How’s it going, Anna? Are you okay?”

Anna drew a deep breath and smiled, “Of course. Yes.”

Guinan reached under the bar and dug around through some bottles, “I have to admit, Anna, I’m a little surprised he agreed to come here.”

Anna laughed, “Don’t you mean, you’re a little surprised that I brought him here?”

Guinan nodded, “That too, yes. I hope you…know what you’re doing.”

She balked a little bit, “Doing? What am I doing?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Guinan shrugged mysteriously as she poured the fizzing ale, “You can get a hermit crab out of its shell, but it always goes back.”

“He’s not a hermit crab, Guinan.” Anna pulled the glass toward her and ran her fingers over the condensation. “Besides, I think trying to be someone’s friend when they saved my life is the least I can do. I’m not giving up.”

Guinan smiled, but it was the soft chuckle from the man next to her that got her attention. A few stools down, a handsome man with graying-black hair and hikers’ clothes looked at the two of them.

“Forgive me for eaves-dropping, young lady, but good for you. Don’t give up.” He took another sip from his glass and nodded approvingly.

Anna smiled at the ‘young lady’ comment, but decided not to correct him, “I’m sorry, but…Oh, you’re the man we picked up in the escape pod. How are you doing?”

“I think I would be doing a lot worse if this ship didn’t have such a good doctor.” He smiled, and as he took another sip of ale his hair fell back and revealed Vulcan ears.

Anna was instantly curious, but kept it to herself, “Dr. Crusher is one of the best.”

He nodded, “True. But like I said, don’t give up. My wife…” His eyes closed thoughtfully for a moment, and he smiled, “My wife was absolutely uninterested in me, but I was persistent. If you don’t care enough to keep trying, then you don’t care enough.”

Anna blushed fiercely and squeezed her glass with both hands, “Oh, no. It’s not like that —.”

“Are you sure? You sound awfully insistent.”

Anna continued to blush, for her youthful appearance made her quite used to the silly way in which middle-aged and older men liked to tease young women. She smiled indulgently and tried to keep her face unreadable, “No. No, I really don’t think that’s the case.”

Guinan tilted her head curiously and tried to read Anna’s subtle tone.

“If you say so.” The man smiled, continuing to tease. He nodded a simple goodbye as Anna took her glass and walked back through the crowd toward her table.

Lore sighed miserably and continued to stare at the passing starscape. Maybe he could do the
power nodules on deck three by himself and let her go for the rest of the day. LaForge wouldn’t have to know. Or maybe he could sabotage the main hollow deck to appear disabled so that Anna could spend hours inside “fixing” it. Yes, maybe that would work. Humans liked hollow decks.

You should just apologize, idiot. Lore grumbled to himself and sank deeper into his chair. It wasn’t until Anna returned, taking her seat without an upward glance, that he straightened his posture a bit. A few awkward moments passed as she sipped at the fizzing gold drink in her hand and said nothing to him. Before he could think twice about his actions, he reached across the table and snatched up one of the strawberries. He popped it into his mouth and ate it quickly, managing only to chew it a few times.

Anna’s somber face brightened with amazement, as if a garden statue had just taken her ice-cream.

Lore cringed terribly. He had been prepared for the motion, but there was no being prepared for the taste! Eating it quickly had done little to take away from the biting bitterness of the fruit, and he frowned openly. “Agh! It tastes fine.” He paused for a moment and examined the sensation. “Wonderful. Now I’ll have to brush my teeth.”

Of course he had eaten the thing to please her, thinking that somehow she wanted him to eat, but he was not prepared for the hilarious bought of laughter that escaped her then. Her anger faded in an instant, and her cheeks grew bright red for an entirely new reason.

“I’m glad I amuse you.” He rolled his eyes, but the sentiment was honest.

Still shaking with silent laughter, she reached for a few more strawberries. “Was, eh…Was that really the first time you’ve ever eaten?”

He nodded.

“What a waste.”

He smirked, “A waste of what? Good strawberries?”

“No.” She smiled, “A waste of an opportunity. You should always, always try to make first things —whatever they are—as good as possible. Lasagna or ice cream would have been better, not just some strawberry to make me feel better.”

Lore looked down with a smile. So, she noticed that, did she? He was glad for it, for apologies were just something he was incapable of doing. He shrugged again, “It’s not important.”

“Like Hell. You wait; I’m going to find something even you will like.”

“You’re approaching twenty minutes.” He reminded her.

“Fine.” She said with a sigh. She ate the last bit of strawberry and sponge cake. “There. I’m done torturing you.”

“Thank you.” He stood, grateful for their departure, and pushed the chair back under the table. He was about to turn, but paused when he saw the strange look on Anna’s face. She was looking past him with a great deal of intensity, her attention absorbed. Lore turned to follow her gaze.

A middle-age man with graying hair and a thick built stood but a few yards away, stock still in the center of the room. His face was frozen in some unreadable expression, and his knuckles appeared white as they gripped the glass in his hand. Lore stared back at him, for the man’s eyes
were firmly fixed on him.

“What?” Lore snapped at the man’s rude, unwavering gaze. Would this crew never get used to his presence?

The man shifted his weight and narrowed his eyes suspiciously, “Eh…. Commander Data?”

Lore sighed heavily and stepped down off the upper deck, “No, I’m not—” His words stopped, for his breath felt caught in his chest. It took but a moment for him to realize that he knew those dark green eyes, so strange even for a Vulcan. He knew also that tenor voice, despite the fact that it had been so different the last time he had heard it. The last time he had heard Narok Reed’s voice, it had been screaming.

Narok Reed’s glass fell from his hand and cracked on the carpeted floor, the red wine splattering like blood. The memory rushed to the front of Lore’s mind against his will, as clear as if it were in the present tense. He took a horrified step back, trying to forget the gut-wrenching screams from his past.

“You! I’ll kill you!” Reed leapt forward, smashing the glass under his boot as he clawed desperately for Lore’s throat.

Lore stumbled back, unwilling to bare the assault and yet unwilling to force Reed back. He fell against a table, sending the startled occupants scrambling for cover as glasses and plates tumbled down and the table collapsed. Reed’s enraged eyes seemed to darken even further as he fell forward, his arms outstretched like daggers.

“You son of a bitch! I’ll kill you!” Reed threw blows in a frantic volley, but just Lore’s raised arms were strong enough to keep Reed’s hands at bay, a fact that only seemed to enrage the Vulcan further.

“Stop! Security to Ten-Forward. Now!” Anna ran toward the collapsed table, pushing a chair aside. “Stop!”

*Stay away, Anna.* But before Lore could shout the words she was on Reed, trying to grab his shoulder. It was a big mistake. Reed spun around, striking Anna square across the face with the side of his hand.

“Oh!” She fell backward like a doll, landing roughly on an overturned chair.

“Hey!” There were multiple people shouting now, and several men were already securing their hands around Reed’s arms, working furiously to pull him back, but it wasn’t necessary. Lore darted his eyes to Anna’s flushed red face and became enraged. He ceased his passive blocking and grabbed Narok Reed by the throat. In a single, quick motion he rolled forward to regain his feet and threw Reed back with enough force to send him several yards across the rough carpet. Lore stood now, eyes glaring down on the man he remembered but did not even know. It was not as if they had been properly introduced.

Reed rolled onto one knee with a painful gasp.

“What the hell is going on here!” It was Riker who came jogging into the room with a team of security guards behind him. He looked at Lore and then at the clearly pummeled Reed.

Lore darted his eyes to virtually every face in the room. It was too much like his dream. They weren’t the same faces, but they were still all accusing, assuming, and the worst thing was that they were right. Whatever terrible conclusions they were drawing, they were nothing compared to
the truth. He did know this man, if only from sight, but it was enough. He had to get away. Lore knew he just had to get out of that room.

Reed was so enraged that it appeared he was having trouble breathing. He drew a deep, painful breath, and glared at Lore. “Murderer! You killed my wife!”

If it was possible for Lore to suffer the pain of a blow, he was sure this was what it felt like.

“Get him out of here!” Riker shouted, pointing at Reed. But the man leapt to his feet and bolted for the far door, the security guards fast on his heels.

Lore could feel his peace—such a weak, tenuous peace!—slipping away from him.

“Lore?” Anna said anxiously as Lt. Varek helped her to her feet.

He did not hear her. He did not hear anyone. He only heard the choking cries of a distant memory. What foolishness! Did he actually think he could banish his past merely by avoiding it? Had he truly been so naïve? He looked up at the dozens of frozen faces surrounding him, each a living accusation to substitute for the dead. He turned away, pushing several crewmen out of his way, and fled from the room.

No, no! He pressed his hands to his temples as he stormed down the corridor, trying desperately to escape and knowing full well that he could not. How could people escape their own memories? How could anyone escape their own crimes? “Lore! Wait!” Anna’s footsteps thudded on the deck as she hurried to catch him. “What was that back there?”

He kept going. “Go away, Hall.”

“No. Talk to me. What was that? Who is he?” She ran the last few yards and grabbed his shoulder as they turned the corner.

He pulled roughly away from her. “I have to leave.” He uttered it in an almost panicked gasp, backing further down the corridor. The memory was nearly consuming him now, for it ran over and over in the same sickening display of cruelty. He could see Reed’s wife, her face turning blue as she gasped for every last breath. He could see the blood rushing to Reed’s green eyes as he had bounded against the airlock door, desperate to save her.

“Wait. Please. Tell me what hap—”

“Are you deaf?” He shouted. He could hear the pleading in her voice, such concerned pleading, and was struck with his own self-loathing. Concern? For me? Me! He worried at times that Hall was learning too much about him, that it was only a matter for time before the continuous speeches against him convinced her to stop working with him, but it was clear now that he was wrong. Hall did not know nearly enough! How else could she show such worry over a monster like him? If only she knew—really knew—she would run from him as quickly as he was trying to run from himself now. “I said go away.”

He made it a few more yards before he felt her hand reach for his arm again. “Don’t just walk away! I want to know—”

Lore reeled on her at once, grabbing her wrist in his vice grip. Anna gasped impulsively as he shoved her against the bulked and her blue eyes continued to stare up at his, either too afraid to look away or not afraid enough. He tightened his grip on her wrist. Did she now see the error of her ways? Did she see how undeserving he was of her friendship, of even her company? He loosened his grip and leaned in close to her. If this was what he had to do, so be it. She would understand.
“I killed his wife.” The words fell like an axe. “Do you understand that?”

Anna’s eyes widened, but remained fixed on his, “I—Lore, you don’t—”

“Don’t!” He threw her hands down with enough force to make her stagger forward. As he backed away from her, slowly, he did not bother to look in either direction. He wanted to be caught. He wanted some crewman to see his ominous stance and raise the alarm. After all, what would they do?

Maybe Data will do what he should have done….

“Stay away from me, Hall. You are not my friend.”

Anna winced as if from a blow and finally turned her eyes away. Lore did not wait to see more. He disappeared down the dim, empty corridor, covering his eyes with his hands. It was some distance before the pounding rush of Anna’s heart faded from his ears.

***

Come on….

“Reed!” Riker shouted as he and two other guards bolted down the corridor at top speed. Bewildered crewmen pressed their backs against the wall as Reed darted past, only to be followed by the two guards and a very unenthused William Riker.

Just one problem after another! Riker fumed inside as he skidded on the carpet to turn yet another corner. Of course, he did not know why he should be surprised. Lore had been little more than a problem since the day he had met him, and it didn’t seem to be changing now. “Reed! Stop! Now!”

Reed made a wrong turn and came to a dead-end corridor finished by a turbo-lift entrance. He did not bother with the lift, but instead slumped over and tried to catch his breath. His heart was pounding so fiercely he thought his chest would collapse.

“All right!” Riker shouted, “Just hold it right there, Mr. Reed.” As thorough as his training was, Riker was at a loss. What could he possibly say to the man? Even Lore’s reaction had pretty much confirmed to him that Reed’s brutal accusation was true. Lore had killed this man’s wife at some point in his terrible history. What could Riker possible say to assuage that?

“We’re going to escort you to guest quarters, where I think you should stay until we reach Sayul Nor.”

Reed’s hands were on his knees now, as if he would be sick, “You…you keep him here? Thats thing!”

Riker took another tentative step forward, “There’s some things you don’t understand, Mr. Reed. If you’ll just come with us—”

“Get away from me! All of you!” He took a few quick steps back, hands up in front of him. “He was disassembled. He was…was at some lab on Earth. He was supposed to stay there forever!”
Riker groaned and clenched his jaw. Reed was preaching to the choir. “I understand, but please just come with us now.”

Reed shook his head slowly, and his eyes narrowed into black slits. “Oh, I don’t think so, Commander. I don’t think you understand anything at all.”

“Mr. Reed, you will come with us now or I will have you transported to the brig.”

Reed lifted his hand toward his lips and pressed the center of his palm with his fingers, “Te’lok! Brosca reev!”

What the…?

Before Riker could take another step, Reed vanished in the purple grain of a transporter beam. He tapped his commbadge, “Riker to Bridge! Search the area for ships. Reed’s just transported!”

“There is no need, Sir.” It was Data’s calm, now morose voice that came over the comm. “A large vessel decloaked off our port side for only two seconds. It is gone.”

Riker sighed and rubbed his face. Yep. One problem after another.
Chapter 15

“He looked like he needed it.”

“The ship decloaked for such a short time that it barely registered on the view-screen.” Geordie LaForge said as he stood next to the large display screen at the end of the conference room. “But from what we were able to see—basic outline, hull color—it doesn’t conform to any known designs.”

“It may be custom.” Riker suggested from his seat next to the Captain, “I recognize that deflector dish. Only Ferengi make an octagonal deflector dish.”

Geordie nodded, “I saw that too. The deflector dish is Ferengi, the port nacelle here looks Vulcan….” He sighed, his engineering sensibilities aghast, “It’s a hodgepodge.”

Picard actually glanced at Data, expecting his long time friend and second in command to comment on Geordie’s choice of vocabulary, but Data’s eyes were cast down on the table. He was deep in thought, and he did not appear in the mood to be curious. Picard grumbled and turned back to Geordie, “I think it’s safe to assume that our ‘lucky’ survivor was the Corona Six crew’s Trojan horse.”

Riker nodded, “The sheer size of that ship would accommodate everything we can account missing from the science station, and then some. And if they were following us the whole time, I have to think they had the same thing planned for us.”

Picard was thoughtful, “Perhaps. But going from a remote station of five crewmen to a starship with nine-hundred is quite a leap, even for the most brazen pirate.” He glanced at Data again. Nothing. “Of course now we have a lead. Who is Narok Reed? If that is even his name.”

Troi shook her head, “I’ve run the name through every Federation data base we have access to. Narok is the third most common Vulcan name, and there are no less than three thousand Reeds in Starfleet alone. I found no combination of the two.”

Picard sighed and looked directly at Data now. Someone knew who this man was. “Data, what did Lore say when you went to see him?”

Data looked up, an anxious frown knitting his forehead, “He was…not helpful, Sir.”

“Anything, Mr. Data.” Picard knew the emotional roller coaster Data was on, but they had to know. “What did he say?”

“He said…” Data shifted his eyes, “He said, ‘Go fuck yourself.’”

Picard grumbled while Troi and Crusher cringed. It was like hearing a toddler curse.

“Well that’s great.” Riker leaned back in his chair.

“If he does not wish to leave his quarters, fine!” Worf growled, leaning over the table, “Let him stay there.”
Picard raised a calming hand, “Regardless of crew sentiment on that, if Lore knows anything about Reed he may know a lot more about what’s going on.”

Data shook his head, “He will not speak to me, Captain. I am rather certain of it.”

Crusher folded her hands on the table and cleared her throat. “Hall. Maybe he’ll talk to Hall.”

“Lieutenant Hall.” Picard nodded, thoughtful. As distant as he kept himself from the general gossip of the ship’s crew, he knew as well as everyone that the newest addition to the engineering crew was the only person with whom Lore would work or speak. “Counselor, will you speak with Lieutenant Hall at your earliest convenience. See if we can’t shed some light on this.”

Data leaned forward, “Captain, if I may, I would like to speak with Lieutenant Hall about Lore.”

Picard met Data’s eyes for a moment, but nodded his assent. He too had a brother with whom he had never been on the best of terms. He could, in some small measure, understand Data’s position and curiosity. He tugged the front of his uniform down and sat up, “We’ll continue on course to Sayul Nor until we see a reason not to. Mr. Reed may have been lying, but there’s still a very good chance that any stolen equipment might have made it there.” He was about to call for a dismissal, but there was quizzical look on Riker’s brow. “Number One?”

Riker looked down the table, “One thing gets me. If he was lying, why couldn’t Diana read it? And why did he—from what I can tell—basically tell us the truth about a lot of things? I mean, when he was describing the attackers he basically described his own ship.”

Troi sighed heavily, as she often did when her empathic abilities failed her. “I think I can give a possible answer to that. When people are lying, it isn’t just the emotional aspect of dishonesty that gives them away. For instance, a person with absolutely no feelings can lie and still be caught by other methods. Body language used to be a key indicator.”

Picard nodded, “Yes. Looking up and to the left.”

“That’s right, in humans.” Troi continued, “But the tell tale sign is focusing on the creative aspect of the brain when a person needs to make something up. Reed told us the truth about almost everything. I think he did board the Corona Six station with engine trouble, only he was faking it. I think the station did suddenly start experiencing extreme technical malfunctions, only Reed was the one responsible for them.”

Riker sighed through his teeth, “So, the less you lie about, the harder it is to get caught?”

Troi nodded, “I am quite certain that Reed knew I was a Betazoid. If he had completely fabricated something, I believe I would have spotted it. He is also incredibly well disciplined mentally.”

It wasn’t what Picard wanted to hear. Somehow madmen always seemed easier to catch when they were actually mad. It was the stable geniuses that were the true battle. “Understood. I know it will be a long shot, but try looking into the Vulcan database for half human births that would correspond to Reed’s estimated age. If he has a human last name, it’s possible his father was human.”

Troi nodded, her knitted brow showing that she already doubted much success with the operation, but it was still worth the try. Data stood and came around the table just as Picard was pushing his chair back in.

“Data,” He stopped his friend, placing a hand on his shoulder, and waited until the others had
left the room, “Lore hasn’t left his quarters in two days, and I find myself wondering why.”

For two days Data had been pondering much the same thing. Lore’s encounter with Reed had been violent, but nothing that could have harmed Lore. Fear did not seem to be an adequate answer. “I have wondered myself, Captain. Commander Riker told me that when Reed attacked Lore, he did not defend himself.” Data shook his head, unable to believe such a thing and yet unable to deny it.

“Do you think it could be regret?” Picard said. Like Data, he doubted it, but could not ignore the evidence.

Data shook his head again, “I do not know, Sir.” He eyes shot up, “Has counselor Troi said anything?”

Picard’s level look was his answer. Lore was not a prisoner and not a suspect in anything. As such, it was a violation of Troi’s personal ethics to divulge the feelings of others just to satisfy curiosity. She would not tell them even if they asked.

Data paused, for his mind still turned and twisted around the accounts that he had heard, and most specifically on the occurrence that most interested him. “Captain, I have interviewed many of the crew who witnessed the altercation between Lore and Mr. Reed. Commander Riker is correct when he says that Lore did not defend himself. He did, however, defend Lieutenant Hall.”

Picard looked at Data, waiting.

“He saved her in the shuttle bay.” Data continued, and his brow was knitted as if it were all a puzzle he either could not figure out or could not accept. Who could blame him? “I… I will speak with Lieutenant Hall, Captain. I believe that if Lore will speak to anyone, it will be her.”

“Data, do you believe that Hall and Lore are friends?” Picard asked the question with barely a concealed cringe. No doubt he found the idea of any member of his crew becoming Lore’s friend to be unappealing.

“I do not know, Sir. I… am not often in engineering when Lore is there.” He said. Of course, just because he did not know did not mean that he had not guessed. “I will speak to her immediately, Captain.”

Picard nodded, “Dismissed.”

Data turned toward the door, but turned back as he reached it. “Captain, do you believe that Lore has regrets?”

Picard sighed heavily and spoke the only answer he could, “It’s hard to imagine that he wouldn’t.”

Data nodded, silent and quick. It was always hard for good people to imagine the thoughts of the bad.

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“I can’t believe you didn’t go to sickbay. That guy hit you pretty hard.” John Larson leaned against the ladder rungs and sipped from his coffee mug. “You really should go.”

Anna shook her head, “Honestly, John. You make it sound like I have blood running down my face. It’s just a little red.”

Larson pursed his lips together and folded his arms across his chest. “I don’t know what you thought you were doing anyway. Vulcans are only about \textit{three times} stronger than humans. Besides, it’s not like Lore would need any help anyway.”

His tone said it all, for Larson lacked almost any ability to mask his opinions or sentiments. But like all such people, he usually wasn’t aware of how transparent he was.

Anna lowered her eyes as if focusing more closely on the console in front of her. “No, he wouldn’t, would he? I’m almost done here, then we can start the next diagnostic. Which is it?”

“What? Oh, eh, the plasma venting system.” Larson took a deep breath and sighed heavily. Anna did the same, for she recognized that motion as Larson’s indicator that he was about to say something unpleasant. “Look, Anna, I’m a little worried about you. I mean…what are you doing?”

She closed her eyes, “\textit{Doing}, John? What do you mean?”

“Come on, Anna, you know what I’m talking about. Why would you take him to Ten-Forward? He doesn’t belong there.”

“Where does he belong, John?” She met his brown eyes evenly. There was a challenge in her voice.

“Not on this ship.” He replied, matter-of-fact. “Damn scientific curiosity…. They should have just kept him in pieces back on Earth—.”

“Excuse me, Lieutenant.”

Larson’s eyes shot up and his face grew pale. “Commander!”

Data stopped a few feet from the two and gave Larson a calm, blank stare. It was the closest Data came to icy. “Lieutenant Hall, may I speak with you?”

Larson gave a quick, silent farewell and escaped around the warp core to join Blake and Varek. Data glanced his way before turning back to Hall and covering a deep, agitated sigh. He understood well that the crew had problems with Lore, that some were genuinely afraid of him, but it still bothered him that so many chose to focus on what Lore was rather than who he was. After all, Data was the same thing as Lore.

Hall pressed a few more controls on the console and let her eyes shift up to Data. “What can I do for you, Sir?”

He hesitated now, unsure of how to begin. Certainly he was there to carry out the Captain’s orders, to see if Hall could persuade Lore to divulge anything he knew about Narok Reed, but he was also there for himself. He wanted to know why Lore did not defend himself in Ten Forward. He wanted to know why no one had seen him in three days.

“I would like to talk to you about Lore.”

She bit her lower lip in an awkward way, “I’m not sure what I could tell you, Sir. Lore isn’t
exactly…talkative.”

“But he does speak with you?” Data pressed.

She nodded, “Yes, but…not about himself. Lore….” She sighed and considered her words, “Lore doesn’t like to talk about his past.”

Data’s eyes widened, “Did he tell you that?”

She shook her head, “You can see it. Sir, did you want to ask me how Lore is feeling? I would think Counselor Troi could give you a better understanding of that.”

Data looked up, a bit surprised. Most people had no idea that empaths could sense android emotions. “No.” He said, “Counselor Troi’s abilities are not—it would be inappropriate of me to ask her.”

Anna tilted her head to one side, “But not inappropriate to ask me?”

Data raised a surprised brow, “I hope you do not find my questions intrus—”

“No.” She said quickly, and shook her head in a sad kind of way, “I’m just glad you bothered to ask, Sir. No one else extends the courtesy.”

That did not surprise him. “Then, others have asked you about Lore?”

She nodded, and the somber look of her face clearly indicated that the past interviews had not been pleasant. “It probably isn’t accurate to say they ask me questions. It is more like they tell me things and then demand confirmation of what they already think.”

There was no need to imagine what others had told her. Data already knew everything they could possibly have said. “I understand. You appear to be the only member of the crew with whom Lore will speak. I have attempted to speak with him since his encounter with Reed, but I have been unsuccessful.”

“I guess I’m not surprised.”

Data tried to read the thoughtful way that she looked down, apparently distracted by some thought, but he had never been very good at such things. “Are you all right, Lieutenant?”

“Of course, Sir.” She said, looking up at once. “Was there something specific you wanted to ask me about Lore?”

“Yes.” He continued, “I would like you to speak with Lore. We are rather certain that Narok Reed was among those responsible for the attack on the Corona Six station, but we have not been able to locate any background information on him. If Lore knows Reed, he may be able to…”

Data trailed off when he saw Hall’s face fall. She bit her lip awkwardly.

“I, eh…I don’t think that’s a very good idea, Sir. Lore was….” She brushed a loose lock of hair back and continued to bite her lower lip. “He told me to stay away from him.”

Data eyes widened, “Why?”

Hall looked away, her lips pursed in a concentrated frown. “He, um…I think seeing this man—Reed—reminded Lore of things. Things he would like to forget.” She thought for another moment about something, but shook the thought away.
“Do you believe Lore regrets the things he has done?” Data asked suddenly. He did not like the way the question burst out of him or why he felt such a need to have it answered. Did it matter either way?

Hall looked directly at him, a kind of disturbed surprise in her eyes, “Of course.”

The complete sincerity in her tone threw Data, and he gave pause. “Why do you believe that?”

“Sir,” She rubbed her face with her fingers as if tired, and in fact she did appear as if she had not been sleeping well. “Lore saved my life. He did that, and everyone seems to be okay with just ignoring it. I won’t.”

“You believe Lore has regrets because he saved you?” Data shook his head as soon as the words came out. It did not sound right. It sounded as if he were mocking her.

Hall chuckled, “Lore has been on this ship for over three months and he has never hurt anyone. He has never tried to leave or take the ship. And based on his past, I would call that alone one hell of a change. And, forgive me for being presumptuous, but a change as significant as that has to come with some moral understanding. Why else would he be any different? After all, if you’re moral enough not to do horrible things, you must be moral enough to feel bad when you do.”

Data stared back and did not know what to say. It was not at all what he had expected. In truth, he did not know what he had expected with regard to Lt. Hall, but certainly he had accounted for her willingness to spend time with Lore as the result of morbid curiosity. That did not appear to be the case. He took a step back and nodded, feeling suddenly so uncomfortable with the topic that he did not know how to proceed. He got the distinct impression that she wanted to defend Lore in some way, a fact that disturbed him indeed.

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” He stopped as if that were it, but did not turn to leave, and Hall continued to watch him expectantly.

“Sir?”

“May I ask you a personal question, Lieutenant?” Data looked evenly at her, his eyes a bit pleading, for he did feel as if he were being intrusive.

“Of course.” She said kindly.

“Why did you agree to work with Lore? Why do you still?” He was shocked by the desperation in his own voice. He simply could not understand it. Was it morbid curiosity? Was she one of those thrill-seeking humans who seemed born without fear?

Hall turned back to the console and became going through unnecessary files. “I, eh….Well, honestly, Sir,” She paused, “He looked like he needed it.”

Oh. Data looked away and felt suddenly embarrassed. It wasn’t curiosity at all. It was empathy. He looked up at her again and saw a deep concern etched into her young—very young—face. She felt sorry for him. Another personal question sprang to mind, and he forgot his manners, “Lore has killed many people. Were you not afraid?”

Hall laughed, “Terrified.”
Chapter 16

“Do you want to know how she died? I’ll tell you.”

In the black, empty room Lore sat in the hollow of the bay window, his head and arms resting forward on his knees. He was not sure why he was sitting in such a manner, or even sitting at all. He did not know what it was like to become tired or fatigued, but he had been standing for days, and it was some small distraction to do something different. He turned his head to the side now, facing the window and the streaming stars outside. He did not wonder where they were going. He did not care.

His eyes fell in a kind of careless gaze on the sunken flowerbed built into the jutting window sill. He had never paid much attention to the lush green array, for he had never had a reason to think of them. They were cared for by the ship’s automated systems, and existed as a petty luxury to the ship’s guests, now wasted on him. He reached out a slow hand and braced a short, thin stem between his fingers. They were so fragile, it was a wonder that such things survived in the wild at all. There were so many obstacles, so very many possible accidents.

He snapped the stem with an effortless twitch of his fingers, and the small plant tumbled down through the leaves of its neighbors. Lore retrieved it and held it close to his eyes. He understood botany very well, and knew precisely what was happening to the defenseless thing. First, the water flow over the vacuoles stopped and the concentration of salts and sugars would rise, reducing the amount of oxygen reaching the…brain? No, plants did not have brains, but other organisms did. Humans did. He remembered now. Her heart rate would have increased dramatically due to the unimaginable pain, causing her to pass out within seconds of her windpipe collapsing and her body being dropped to the ground. But her brain would have struggled, perhaps even regaining consciousness again before finally suffocating to death—.

“Stop!” He tossed the severed stem into the flowerbed and covered his face with his hands. Please, leave me alone….

He crossed his arms on his knees and rested his forehead on them like a child. When he concentrated carefully he could sometimes press his misery down to the point of numbness. He could never feel good—he was convinced that he would never feel good again—but the numbness was preferable to the crushing hell of shame. It was a pity he never seemed to manage it for long. His victims would not allow it.

Get out of my head!

The door chime sounded and he did not bother to look up from his intense concentration. He knew who it was, after all. Data had attempted to speak with him every day since his encounter with Reed, since he had decided that seeing no one and nothing was the best possible course.

The chime sounded again. “Lore?”

His eyes shot up.

“It’s Hall. Can I talk to you?”
He turned his head away from the door. Just what the hell did she think she was doing? Had he not told her to stay away? Why would she come to see him?

*Why didn’t you come sooner…?*

He cringed when the chime sounded again. Data never rang more than once, not after he had told him in no uncertain terms to get lost, but he had no hopes that Hall would be so easily deterred. The chime rang again, and he heard her voice through the door.

“Computer, security override—”

*Don’t do that…*

“—Lieutenant Hall. Four, four, seven, two—”

*Damn human!*

The doors hissed open and a beam of light cut through the dark. She entered quickly, letting the doors hiss shut behind her. Lore watched through the near impenetrable black as she reached blindly for the wall, her eyes dilated wide in a futile attempt to see through the darkness. Her steps were cautious, but not afraid, her eyes wide, but undisturbed. Only the increased rhythm of her heart told a deeper tale. Finally, her hand found the small control panel on the wall and she pressed blindly. A small light activated in the sunken bookshelf near the replicator, giving the room a faint illumination.

“I was in engineering.” She said softly, “And you weren’t.”

Lore kept his eyes on the sill, not moving at all. Any change might frighten or encourage her, neither of which he truly wanted. After a minute of still silence, Hall sighed and shifted her weight awkwardly. He could discern complete details in his peripheral vision, and he watched her under the guise of not watching her at all. She held a small book in her hand, short and narrow, but disproportionately thick. The dark green cover was heavily embossed in an antiquated style, and the discolored pages and worn corners identified an object of considerable age. She held it now between both hands as she took a few steps deeper into the room, her head craned as if to see his downturned face.

“I was thinking,” She began slowly, “that it can’t be very interesting in here.”

*Interesting? No.* He was amazed by his own desire to know what she was thinking.

“So, I brought you something.” She presented the book, but made no attempt to hand it to him.

*Why are you doing this?*

She walked to the lighted shelf and placed the book properly on its edge, tucked securely in the corner. “I’m not sure if you can, but I hope you’ll consider reading it at a more human pace. There’s something to be said for suspense.”

He heard the subtle waver in her voice and the few excited beats of her heart. She was not as confident as she seemed. “What do you want?” He seethed, his voice sliding into the silence as if he had been speaking all the while.

She lifted her chin confidently, “I want you to come back to engineering.”

He scoffed with such a derisive sneer and looked away. He did not want to be cruel. He did not
even want to be unkind, but if silence was not going to keep her away for her own good, than outright rudeness would have to do. “Get out.”

Hall’s feet scuffed the carpet but did not move very far. She pulled her hands down from the shelf and held them in front of her, undeterred. “You would be doing me a favor.”

Don’t make me do this, Hall. He clenched his eyes shut and pleaded silently for her to leave. Had she not learned her lesson last time? Did she not realize that no good could come from trying to be his friend? Still, he wanted to look up at her more closely, to see if Reed’s enraged strike had left any mark, for what better proof would he need that he was nothing but trouble to those around him?

She took a few steps towards him again, now only a few yards away. “I had to spend a nine hour shift with Varek. I hope you’re happy.” She said with a forced chuckle. She waited for something, but when he neither moved nor spoke, she dropped her hands with a rough sigh. “Lore, Narok Reed left the ship. You don’t have to worry about seeing—”

“Didn’t I tell you to stay away from me!” He stepped down from the sill now and stared at her, knowing that she would hardly be able to make him out in the dim light.

“I heard you.”

“Apparently not.”

He could not see her, but he heard her heart thump with nervous agitation, “I’m…Just come to engineering with me, okay? I prefer it.”

“Why!” He spun around now, eyes boring down on her. “Just tell me that! Why?”

She stomped forward, fists clenched, “Because you’re my friend!”

Friend? Friend! “I am not your friend!” He spat the words at her with as much derision as he could muster. Even if it were true, even if she could believe such a thing, she would be foolish to entertain it. What kind of friend would he be?

Hall raised her face in defiance, “Whatever you say, Lore.”

That was it. He had had enough of her assumptions, her confidence. He did not need someone trying to drag him out or to make him feel better. He had no use for humans who hated him and he certainly had no use for the mystifying one that did not. Even if that one sometimes brought him more peace than he thought possible. Even if just the idea of working silently next to her in a Jefferies tube pleased him more than anything else he could imagin—.

No!

He took a step toward her. “Get. Out.”

“Make. Me.”

Ahgg! Lore darted forward and grabbed her by the wrists. It was calculated to frighten her, and yet he felt out of control. He knew what he was doing, and yet wished he was not doing it. Hall gasped in terror and stared up at him. He held her wrist tightly, too tightly, and pulled her close, for he was determined that she would understand.

“I know people tell you things, Hall, but what could they possibly tell you when they don’t
know the half of it?” He hissed his words at her in a cold, harsh whisper. She gasped again and seemed to pull against him, but his hands never moved, “Narok Reed. Do you know anything about him?”

He backed her closer to the wall, step by step, his grip on her wrists tightening with each word he spoke. But he was hardly aware of her flesh under his hands.

“Lore….” She gasped as if out of breath, pulling against his hands. Her heart raced and he could feel the violent, fearful rush of her pulse under her skin.

“Oh, you don’t?” He continued his ominous stare, his eyes mere inches from hers now. “Narok Reed. I know that name. I know it because I memorized the rosters from the incoming ships to the Ohniaka III outpost.” He saw her eyes widen and pressed her back against the wall. “That’s right. The same outpost I sent the Borg to destroy. Reed’s wife was Dr. Lydia Reed. Do you want to know how she died? I’ll tell you.”

Hall made a choking sob and her knees trembled beneath her. “Lore… please ….” Her fingers were beginning to turn purple.

“I killed her! I’m the one who sent those damn Borg there, and I knew exactly what they would do. Do you want to know what they did? What did the products of my glorious imagination do to Lydia Reed!” He closed his eyes. “They picked her up by the throat and crushed her wind pipe like a paper tube. It took her two minutes to die. Two minutes!”

His head dropped forward, hanging between the hands that still clenched her wrists like a vice. The image played again and again, but it was not the shrouded horror of the young Lydia Reed that shook him, for her suffering had been brief. No. It was the twisted horror and rage of the man who had watched her die, completely unable to do anything about it.

“I saw it all.” He continued, “I ordered the Borg to keep a neural link with me at all times, and I saw it all through their eyes. But what does it matter? I might as well have crushed her neck myself.”

The tears came, and he did not notice them until they had run down his cheeks and dripped to the dark grey floor.

“Go!” he dragged her toward the door, trying all the while to hide his face. This was none of her business! She had provoked him. It was all her fault!

Hall’s feet barely made traction as he pulled her to the door by her already throbbing wrists. Still she starred up at his wretched face. The doors opened, framing his guilty assault in the light of the corridor.

“Oh, no….I’m sorry! I’m sorry, Anna!”

He rushed back to the door and darted in the corridor, but it was empty. The faint sound of
footfalls grew fainter, until he heard nothing but the hum of the ship.
Chapter 17

“I miss you, Lydi.”

“What’s happening?”

“They’re everywhere! Get to the weapons locker!”

Narok pressed against the wall as a team of heavily armed Starfleet officers rushed past. He grabbed the last young man by the arm, turning him toward him. “What’s going on? Who’s attacking us?”

The man pulled a bit, looking eagerly to his companions, “Get a phaser, Doc! There’s another locker on C level.”

“Phaser for what? What the Hell’s happening!” Narok fell back against the wall as the whole world seemed to shake like a rattle. People scattered, dropping to the floor and covering their heads as fragments of light fixtures and ceiling tiles fell.

The young man pulled again and turned his head when a wrenching scream filled the air. “I gotta go! Get out! Forget, the escape pods, just get away from the station. Go into the woods.”

Narok felt his chest cave in, for no longer could he ignore the seriousness of what was happening, even if he still didn’t know what was happening. “Come on, Mike. Who is it? Cardassians? Were you able to get a distress signal out?”

He pulled away finally, “What?” The man shook his head as if Narok were the dumbest person he had ever met. “No, just aim, Doc, when you see them. You won’t be able to fire more than a few times.”

“Why—” Narok was a bright man, and it did not take long for him to see what could possibly be attacking them, for what possible assailant could only be shot ‘a few’ times. “No. It can’t be….”

“Get a weapon, Doc! Now! There aren’t enough for everyone!” With that, he leapt away and darted through the lobby after the others. The lights flickered again, and Narok heard phaser fire over the rattle of the building’s foundation. He stood frozen for several seconds and wished for the first time in his life that he had followed the Vulcan way of life, as his father had wanted. Perhaps then he would not have felt the crippling cold of fear.

A volley of screams rang out from the corridors across the lobby, and a woman rushed out towards the doors. As she reached them, a green disruptor blast struck her in the back and she collapsed against the pristine glass. Narok raced back into the hallway, now a chaotic hell of flickering lights and panicked voices. People pressed past him with single minded desperation, and he was sure he felt the sickening roll of bodies under his feet. Like them, there was but one thought on his mind, so consuming it was amazing he even remembered the breath.

Lydi! Where are you! “Lydi! Lydia!” He shoved people away from the wall as he slid along it, desperate to reach the point of solid light at the end of the hallway. The infirmary was closer now, and the hall grew vacant as the last desperate man rushed past into the darkness. Narok looked
back and saw the brilliant flashes of green energy in the blackness, following by the guttural
chokes of death.

*My, God…No!* He sprinted to the door, grabbing the frame to turn himself, and stood frozen in
the morning light. It was a beautiful day outside, bright and sunny, the green grass almost emerald
through the tall windows. It was amazing how such beautiful light could make a Borg even more
grotesque. The thing stood in the middle of the room, its mechanical arm raised in front of it like
the gun of an ancient tank, scanning the fruits of its labor. The floor of the infirmary lay strewn
with bodies, some upturned with their eyes wide open.

“Agh!” Narok darted to the side, knowing that to go back was to go to the devil, and rushed for
the only safety he could see. A phaser blast narrowly missed his leg as he fell into the
decontamination room. Desperately, he pulled his legs out of the way and slammed the door shut,
locking it with the pressurized seal and magnetic bolts. He scrambled back from it as several blasts
struck the glass. It would all be over soon. This was how he would die.

*I won’t be assimilated. I’ll make them kill me first.*

But the glass did not shatter and the hand of a Borg did not reach for him. An almost
intoxicating thrill ran through him, and he actually laughed. The decontamination chamber was
level six, Starfleet’s highest, and not even a proton explosive would pierce it. Narok staggered back
against a medical table, struggling against fear and elation to gain his footing. He would wait for
them to move on, and then he would slip out to the windows. Maybe the Borg wouldn’t follow
them into the woods.

“No! No survivors!” The Borg slammed into the glass with the force of a charging bull,
pounding his mechanical fist against it in a rage. Narok rolled the medical table away and pressed
his back to the far wall of the chamber. This wasn’t right. It made no sense. Borg were not
supposed to get angry. Borg were not supposed to *care* whether or not someone got away.

Suddenly the Borg stopped his rage and brought his face so close to the glass his nose pressed
against it. “You will not survive, human. Organic life-forms are obsolete!” It smiled in a hideous
display of pleasure, graying teeth showing like fangs. Narok felt the temperature on his skin
plummet and a sickness rise in his throat.

*What the hell is happening? These aren’t Borg!*

In a flash, like the sprinting of a cat across an alley, a figure darted from behind an upturned
medical table and flew toward the door. The smiling Borg spun around with more agility than it
looked capable of, and caught the unlucky figure deftly by the neck.

“No! No!” He sprang toward the door and clawed desperately at the vault wheel, but it would
not budge. “Lydi!”

“No! Lydi!” He pressed against the wheel with all the strength he had and some he did not. He
felt his ring finger snap painlessly. “Come on!”

*Decontamination incomplete. Do not open doors.*

He looked up and saw the smear of the blood run across the glass as the Borg slid Lydia along
it. Her beautiful chestnut hair was matted red with her blood. “Computer! Open the door! Now!”
“Unable to comply. Sudden decompression warning.”

“I don’t care! Do it!” He stood back and kicked at the wheel, desperate to turn it even an inch, but it was to no avail.

“Unable to comply. Initiating safe depressurization. Two minutes, forty-eight seconds.”

“No! Please!” He slammed his fists against the glass now, shattering the already detached bone in his ring finger.

The Borg pulled Lydia away from the glass and raised her off the floor like a toy. Her hands gripped with such desperate futility at its hand and scratched merciless cuts through its bloodless, grey skin. For a mere second, for that was all there was, Lydia looked through the glass and into Narok’s horrified eyes. They were so still, so…peaceful?

“No!”

Her eyes rolled back into her head and shot red as the Borg’s fingers crushed through the rings of her wind pipe. Her feet kicked in frantic, jerking motions, but she made no sounds and her hands fell slack to her sides. The Borg released her and turned before she even hit the ground.

“God, no! Please! Oh…” His knees fell from under him and he slid down the glass. He could see her eyes staring up at him, bloody and broken and lifeless. “Lydi….Baby….”

“Two minutes, thirty seconds to depressurization.”

***

Reed’s eyes opened quietly, but it did not last. He buried his face into the flat, dirty pillow and screamed. His fingers clawed at the sheets and they tore under the strain, but neither could soften the crippling rage that seemed to poison his muscles until they turned to stone. He jerked himself up and sat with his back against the cold wall, his sweat soaked head resting in his hands.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Lydi.” He let his head fall back against the wall and his eyes roll up to the low ceiling as he tried to slow his ragged breath. His heart was beating so fast that it was like a kettle drum in his chest. It had been a long time, years, since the events of that day had consumed his dreams. Of course, it was not as if he was ever without them. It was not as if he went a day without seeing her beautiful face turned grey by death.

“God, I miss you.” He let his head drop forward again, and he pressed his fingers together in the subtle pose of meditation, but he could not keep his hands from shaking, and his old broken finger ached. Still, he tried to draw on his peaceful images, the way his father had taught him in his youth. He remembered the first time he had seen Lydia Reed, so young and beautiful, standing in the doorway of the Federation Medical Academy. It had been like a loud noise suddenly heard by a deaf man, for what was love to a Vulcan but music they could not hear? He remembered the first time he had asked her to have lunch with him, and she had said she would only if he promised to smile and laugh. But the memories were like scenes on a viewscreen, and someone kept standing up to block the view. He tried to push the obstruction away, but his control was falling apart, and he could only see the unnatural gold eyes of a monster.
“Errr…No, no!” He pressed his fingers together until they formed clenched fists, and his teeth gritted together like a vice. “Lore!”

He could not push it away. There was no amount of discipline or meditation that could suspend the shock and disgust that made it hard just to breath. How could they have that thing on their ship? They knew what it was. They knew what it had done!

No, no. It’s not a thing. He nodded to himself to confirm the cold fact, for he would not allow Lore to escape that easily. A thing doesn’t have guilt. A thing is not responsible for what it does, nor can it be held accountable for the hapless victims that fall in its path. But Lore was no storm or malfunctioning piece of equipment. No. Narok could not give him such a luxury. He could feel a sickening heat rising over him, making his skin crawl. His hands tensed and relaxed, straining to relieve a rage that had no outlet. After all, Lore wasn’t there, and even if he were, what could he do?

“I’ll kill you.” He whispered so low to himself that it was lost in the jagged rumbled of the ship. “I swear.”

A sharp, hollow pounding drew his raging eyes to the door. He leapt off the bed and pulled his shirt from the back of a nearby chair, toppling it to the floor. “Get away from that damn door!”

“Get out here, Reed.” Came a cold, calm voice. “We have some things to discuss.”

Narok pulled the thick, worn sweater over his head and unbolted the door with a violent bang. He stormed out into the dim, steel grate corridor. “What!”

Buel Kala stood with her hand poised on one hip, an accusing frown lining her face. She was a Bajoran woman of no more than forty with short dark hair and a strong, aggressive build, as hard and focused as the Cardassian occupation could ever produce. She looked up at him now with narrowed, cold eyes, her expression a list of complaints.

“Anything? You got anything to say about what the hell happened over there?”

He pulled the door with a deafening bang. “Don’t give me any of your shit, Buel.” He stepped around her and moved down the corridor.

“You have any idea what this is going to do? We had to decloak when you activated the automatic transport. They saw us! What the fuck are we supposed to do now?”

“Why don’t you throw a party, Buel. There’s plenty of space in the cargo bay.” He tossed back, for he was in no mood to deal with her crap today. It was like talking to a Ferengi. She had only one thing on her mind: profit.

“Hey! Damnit, Reed, I need some answers. What am I supposed to tell everyone?”

He stopped dead and turned around, “You are not supposed to tell them anything. You don’t have to worry about doing anything, Buel, and you know why? Because this is my ship and it goes where I say, when I say. Don’t forget it.”

Buel’s chest lifted in an obvious display of failing self-control. Her jaw clenched like a vice. “What happened over there?”

“You fucked up! That’s what happened!” He roared, and his voice trailed down the corridor like a claxon in a can. Buel flinched and stepped back. It wasn’t fear, for that woman had seen things in her life that would make even him blush. It was surprise. Reed never yelled, and his
stance was never so aggressive. It was very…un-Vulcan.

“I did my job.” She retorted, chin up.

“Oh, that’s nice. Let’s say next time you do it when you’re supposed to. It doesn’t help to transport the crew to holding cells when they’re already dead! Now we have six dead federation scientists. I’m sure that’ll give Starfleet all the reason they need to pay attention now.”

Her eyes twitched, “You were supposed to get them into the escape pods. They weren’t even supposed to be there after the life support went down.”

He wasn’t in the mood to argue. What the hell did it matter anyway? The Corona Six crew was dead. Plenty of people were dead. “Get up to the bridge and tell Kurn that his precious shipment of dilithium crystals will be a little late.” He could still see Lore’s sneering expression behind his eyes, like a frosted glass distorting the world.

Buel’s eyes widened, “Late? We’re on schedule, which you would know if you hadn’t been sleeping—”

“We’re changing course. Head for Sayul Nor at warp six.”

Now she truly let her lips curl in a defiant sneer. “Are you out of your mind? That’s one of the first places the Enterprise will look. We need to get out of this sector, and fast. We’ll find another buyer for the dilithium.”

Narok’s fists shook like a tremor and he pressed his hands together, his eyes closed, “Get up there and change course. Now.”

Buel rolled her head around and stepped past him, “Whatever you say, Captain.”

He stood still until her thundering, graceless steps faded and he was alone again. Thoughts raced through his head like dots connecting themselves. Buel was right. The Enterprise would certainly go to Sayul Nor, it was just a question of who would arrive first, him or Lore. But they would both be there, and a strange kind a giddiness rushed over him, like a drug as he saw the dots connect in another direction. All those people aboard the Enterprise…They knew what he was. How could they not? They knew what he was and yet they kept him like a pet. They let him walk their corridors and eat their food! They were just as guilty as him.

He stepped to the wall and pressed the comm box. “Buel! Increase to warp eight and let me know as soon as you pick up the Enterprise on long range.”

“Got it.” Came the terse reply.

He pressed his hands together and concentrated again, with more success this time. He could feel the rage melting into a strange thrill that almost made him laugh. “I miss you, Lydi.” He whispered, “He won’t get away this time. He’ll pay. I swear.”

_They all will._
Chapter 18

“*You know what Klingons say about revenge.*”

“To Guinan,” Said Picard as he rose his glass in the air. “for allowing us to entertain ourselves by subjecting her to this public humiliation.”

“Here, here!” A throng a cheerful laughs lifted along with the champagne flutes. Guinan faced the room from a stool near the bar and smiled sheepishly. It was the first time many had ever seen the calm matriarch of Ten Forward show any sense of awkwardness.

“Thank you, Captain, for not singing the birthday song.” Guinan said with an appreciative nod.

“He talked us out of it!” Geordie called from across the room. There were a few more laughs and calls of happy birthday as the group began to disperse and mingle. Guinan looked on indulgently. It had not been her idea to have a birthday celebration, that was for was certain. After all, five hundred and two anniversaries later, it really wasn’t that exciting any more, but she knew that was not the case with her human friends. Humans loved a birthday party, and they took some special pleasure in celebrating those that focused on an advanced age. But since no one aboard the Enterprise had ever made a spectacle of her birthday before, she had a very good idea who to blame for this impromptu humiliation.

She swiveled her chair toward the bar and rested her elbows on the edge. “Just admit it. I know it was you.”

Anna Hall stood behind the bar, her hands busy over a cutting board covered with exotic vegetables. She continued to focus her eyes on her work, but her lips stretched into a guilty smile. “Why, Guinan, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Mmm….” Guinan mused suspiciously, “Today is my *proper* birthday, Anna, according to the El’Aurian calendar.”

Hall tried to keep her face even, but the smile she already had gave her away. “Ah, busted by my own thoroughness.”

“Indeed.” Guinan agreed. “But don’t worry. I’ll forgive you. If things don’t get much worse.”

“Phew! Thank you.”

Guinan peered over the edge of the bar and took in the brewing assortment of foods on the lower counter. A large pot simmered, sending up a misty cloud of fragrant steam. “It smells good.”

“Really?” Hall looked over the pot with some concern, “The recipe says it should stink to high heaven at this point. Maybe the cream is bad.”

“I didn’t know you were a cook.”

“Not really.” Hall shrugged as she scooped up a pile of dark purple objects and dropped them into the pot. “But it’s relaxing.”
“Ah.” Guinan nodded in her knowing fashion, “and you usually don’t need relaxing. But, today you do?”

Hall gave her a suspicious look and sighed, “Why, Guinan, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Ah.” Guinan nodded again and took a long sip from her short glass of Vulcan ale, but she was not going to let her fellow El’Aurian get away so easily. “So, I heard that Lore wasn’t in engineering this morning. Again.”

Hall shrugged in an exaggerated way, her eyes firmly down, “He wasn’t.”

“And I heard that he won’t talk to anyone. He won’t even answer his door. Have any idea why that might be?”

“I don’t know.” Hall retorted rather roughly, her knife slicing dangerously off the side of an onion, “I’m not his baby-sitter.”

Guinan blinked in surprise and continued to watch her for several seconds. It was true Hall had not been on board for very long, but Guinan had a way of reading people. She had an even deeper way of reading her own kind. “Did you speak with Lore?”

Hall looked up, but before she could express whatever thought had popped into her head, Larson stepped up to the bar and leaned over the edge. “Anna, what’s the ETA on that food? If I don’t eat something soon, I’m using the replicator.”

Hall pointed a threatening finger at him, “No, you won’t! And it won’t be much longer.”

Larson smiled happily, too happily for the mere expectation of food, and Guinan tilted her head at him. There was a human even an illiterate could read. The only person on board who seemed to express any doubt that John Larson was infatuated with Hall was Hall herself. He lingered for an awkward moment, having gotten his answer and stalling for another reason to remain.

“I haven’t seen that bracelet in a while.” He commented, nodded toward Halls left hand. She wore a jumbling silver charm bracelet, weighed all around with a miscellaneous assortment of silver and colored charms. Luckily for Larson, it was difficult to discern any of them from a distance, and he reached for her hand with enough speed to guarantee success.

Hall winced in pain at his touch, but Larson was oblivious as his eyes stayed down on her smooth white hand. Guinan, however, was not so preoccupied, and gave Hall a concerned frown.

“Didn’t that Teleryte ambassador give this to you when we were on the Charleston? I never saw you wear it before.” Larson smiled and continued to thumb through the little charms like pages in a book.

“Uh, yeah, that’s right.” Hall held her hand tenuously in Larson’s as if trying to relief all the weight from his hold. She saw the curious frown on Guinan’s face and looked away.

“I’ve heard of charm bracelets. That ambassador was serious to buy an Earth antique.” He looked up at Guinan and rolled his eyes, “It’s a funny story. We were on this away mission on the Charleston, and they send Anna here along to help with the repairs. Apparently no one knew that to Telerytes red hair is, well….Long story short, their ambassador proposed to her! Can you believe that?”

“I respectfully declined.” Hall muttered, her jaw clenched in hidden pain.
Larson looked back to Hall and smiled, “You know, you really should push your sleeves up when you’re cooking. You’ll ruin your sweater.”

He brought his other hand over the bar as if he would slide her sleeve up over her wrist, but Hall quickly pulled away. “That’s what laundry processors are for. Would you...eh...” She searched the counter and picked up a bowl of dull yellow berries, “Would you take these over to Kendrick. I told him I would save him some. A Bajoran delicacy.”

Larson sighed, disappointed, but his smile still showed he was undeterred, “Sure, Anna. Call me when the whatever-it-is is ready.”

“You’ll be the first.” She assured him, and immediately returned to chopping vegetables that were already thoroughly chopped.

Guinan set her glass down and folded her hands on the bar. Just as the crew was unaccustomed to seeing Guinan sheepish under attention, Guinan was not accustomed to seeing Hall so closed-in. The young woman was clearly distracted, and that famous El’Aurian intuition gave her a good idea what it could be. “Anna, did you see Lore today? Yesterday? What happ—”

“—Do you like olives?”

Guinan sighed and gave her young friend a truly concerned look, “It depends, Anna. There are many kinds.”

“Green pitted ones?” Hall held up a small bowl of the olives with her other hand.

“I’m not sure. I’ve never had them—”

“Guinan!” Riker called suddenly from a long table near the window. “Time to open the presents!”

Guinan’s brow wrinkled into a frown. She looked at Hall, whom she wanted to help, and the crew whom she had to indulge. “It’s not an El’Aurian custom to give presents.”

The guests responded with a volley of cheerful boos and objections, cajoling her to accompany them.

“I’m not quite sure how,” Guinan whispered as she alighted from her stool, “but I am going to get you for this, Anna Hall.”

“Sure.” Hall shrugged with a pleasant smile, “Whatever you say.”

Guinan walked slowly to the assembly, their brightly wrapped gifts bouncing in their arms. Hall lowered her eyes and, seeing that there were no other eyes upon her, slid her sleeve up to her elbow and lowered it into a hidden bowl of crushed ice.

As Guiana stepped away from the bar and drifted into the crowd, Lore pulled back from the glass of the door and pressed his back to the bulked. There was little point in hiding now, he knew, for he had already been spotted by dozens of crewman along his risky journey. When he had left his quarters, asking the computer where he could find Lt. Hall, he had hardly known what he was doing, and he still didn’t. He slapped his hand against the bulked in frustration and tried to move his feet. He could only go back to his quarters or do what he had come there to do. Neither pleased him.

*Just do it, you coward!* He turned his head and looked through the glass again. No one was near...
her. She was standing behind the bar, doing something he could not see. He wondered why she was not with the others, laughing and teasing and giving gifts. What was wrong?

He pulled his eyes back from the door again as a young officer walked past and gave Lore several double takes. He cringed, for he knew he had but minutes before someone told Data and Data came to look for him. He could still return to his quarters, he could abandon the whole thing at that very moment, but even as he considered giving up he bowed under a new wave of guilt. How nice it had been when he cared only for himself! How much easier it had been back then! Of course, given the choice, he knew he would not go back to it.

*Go in there, you coward!* He held the small book in his hand, the one Hall had left in his quarters, and ran his fingers over the rough carved surface. It was old and irreplaceable and she had left it with him. The whole crew knew that he had destroyed practically every object in his quarters months ago, and yet she had left this precious thing in his care. Why would she do such a thing? What reason had he given her to trust him?

He lowered his arms to his sides and closed his eyes as if about to jump into a dark pool. The Ten Forward door opened, and he jumped.

Hiding in plain sight was something Lore knew he was incapable of doing, and so he walked directly toward the bar with a long, determined gate. He kept his eyes forward, his hearing drawn in, and ignored as much as possible everyone and everything. It bothered him that he should care what any of them thought, but he would deal with that later. For now, he had an objective.

Hall, not seeing him, had ducked down behind the bar and begun rummaging through a floor cooler filled with fruits and clinking bottles. She reached up blindly and set a red bottle on the counter a few inches from where Lore stood. He peered over her, his lips moving silently before snapping shut. What could he say? Hello? What a perfectly inappropriate sentiment! He uttered the first words that came to mind.

“I don’t like reading at a human pace.”

Hall’s rummaging stopped and she looked up at him. Lore darted his eyes away, unable to meet her evenly, for it felt like something he did not deserve. He did not deserve her company or her friendship. It was strange. He had never worried about deserving anything before.

Hall stood slowly and her expression suddenly hardened. Without another look, she took up the knife and began mincing the herbs on the cutting board.

She’s angry with me. Lore closed his eyes and let his posture slump.

“I have your book.” He said quickly and laid it on the counter before her. That heavy tone of contrition, often more a communicator that words alone, was something that eluded him. He knew he looked more uncomfortable than sorry.

“Huh.” She nodded without looking at him, and continued to cut the herbs with heavy, graceless chops.

“I read *The Raven* at human pace.” He offered again after a few silent seconds. “It’s very frustrating.”

Her cutting stopped for a beat before continuing in the same vein, but he was encouraged by the slip. She was angry at him, that much was clear, but it was far better than what he had dreaded: fear. She did not appear to be afraid. She was not looking anxiously to the others for help or trying
to get away. That fact alone gave him some comfort.

“I didn’t finish the whole book. It took three hours just to get a quarter through.” His tone was a sorry attempt at casualness. “Frankly, I don’t know how you stand it.”

She glanced up with quick, angry eyes, only to turn them decidedly away once more. She scooped up the bunch of herbs and dropped them unceremoniously into the pot before activating a faucet and washing her hands.

Lore sighed and took a moment to look around the room. Guinan was the only person who appeared to be giving him much notice, and he turned quickly back toward the bar to avoid her. Hall was not going to talk to him. She was too angry, and that hard conclusion was far more painful than he would have thought. It did not make sense to him that her silence should bother him so. He had murdered people. He had taken peoples’ loved ones, ruining their lives forever, and yet it was his guilt over hurting this one human that tormented him enough to actually consider the impossibility of an apology!

She hates me. What was the point in apologizing now? She would not wish to hear it. Lore picked up the book and placed it further down the counter, clear of the steaming splatter of the simmering stew. He considered saying goodbye and being done with it, but as he watched Hall gingerly dry her hands on a towel his breath caught in horror. He saw the dark brown line that circled the outside of her wrists. He stepped forward and reached for her hand in an instant. She gasped and closed her eyes as he held her hand lightly in his. With the other, he pushed up her sleeve and felt the closest thing an android could feel to being sick. Her wrist was a dark brown mark, fading to yellow over her hand. Crawling away from the bruise like spider webs were the tiny red lines of broken capillaries and swollen veins. He knew he had caused her pain, but he did not know he had done this.

“I’m sorry.” The words came as a sudden, almost panicked whisper. He leaned his elbows against the bar and clenched his eyes shut with a loathsome frown, all the while still holding her hand. He wondered vaguely if anyone else in that room had ever been so disgusted with themselves! He doubted it. So many people apologized because they wanted to be liked, but all he wanted was forgiveness. It was inconceivable, but at that moment he would give anything just to have it. Please forgive me.

Hall’s breath caught and Lore felt her hand close on his for a moment. He wondered if she had any idea that he had never said sorry to anyone in his entire life.

“Lore. Lore.” Hall whispered and closed her hand on his again, pulling him from his turbulent thoughts. “Please let go of my hand.”

He lifted his head and glanced over his shoulder, for something in her tone spoke of onlookers. Several of the guests were shooting anxious glances in his direction, but LaForge and Larson were staring, the latter with such a scandalized expression that his jaw fell open. Not wishing to appear reactionary to their gawks, Lore slowly released Hall’s hand and turned his back on the room once more.

He stared at her, confounded, “Why? Why didn’t you go to Crusher or sickbay? Why didn’t you—”

“—Tell on you?” She supplied suddenly. Her eyes were almost sad and she shook her head as if disappointed.

“Yes!” He hissed through clenched teeth. “Why didn’t you turn me in?”
Hall was taken aback by the disapproval in his voice, and only seemed to grow sadder. She picked up a large ladle and stirred the stew slowly. “What do you think would have happened if I had done that?”

He balked, unsure of the point in her question. He pressed his hands flat on the bar and tried to get his words straight, but he was having a rather hard time. “They would have put me in the brig, sent me back to Earth, disassembled me, something!”

“Exactly.” She said, nodding. “That’s exactly what would have happened.”

He scoffed again, bewildered at how she could be so cryptic. More honestly, he was at a loss to explain why she would bare such obvious pain when she did not have to. If she went to Crusher, he would only get exactly what he deserved. “So?” He continued, “What does that mean?”

A gentle smile crossed her lips as she ladeled a small heap of stew into a dish and set it on the counter, “What can I say, Lore? I would rather you were around than not.”

What? He struggled to figure what she was saying, and could only come to the obvious conclusion. She was protecting him. He gripped the edge of the bar and did everything he could not to fall into euphoric laughter. Forgiven! She forgives me! “Does this mean that you aren’t angry with me?”

“Oh, no….” She shook her head very seriously, “It doesn’t mean that at all. I am pissed!”

“But you didn’t turn me in—”

“You don’t get revenge by turning people in, Lore.” She said as she took up the large chopping knife, “I could have been hatching my own devious plot for revenge all this time.” She examined the tip of the blade with one finger like a cartoonish holonovel villain.

Lore smiled as a wave of relief—and amusement—settled on him. Was she really making a joke of this? What little he did know about her told him that she certainly would. “Oh, really?”

“Definitely.” She nodded, “You don’t know. This whole time I could have been planning. And then, weeks from now, maybe months, bam!” She slammed the knife down on the board, executing a defenseless apple without trial.

“Mmm.” He feigned some alarm, but his smile gave him away just as easily as hers’ did. The best he had hoped for when he had made his decision to come there was that she would forgive him, that she might say she did not hate him, but certainly that she wanted nothing to do with him again. But all his past experiences with her considered, he realized he should have known better. For whatever mysterious, impossible reason, Anna Hall liked him.

“Weeks from now?” He laughed, realizing that he had been staring at her for too long.

“Sure.” She said, “You know what the Klingons say about revenge.”

“Mmm…right.” Lore took another glance about the room to gauge when his welcome would expire, for he hoped that the atmosphere would allow him to stay a little longer. He met eyes with Larson, and the man’s shocked expression switched to anger just as Lore felt a soft nudge against his arm. He looked down to see that Hall had pressed a small dish of stew to him.

“Try it.” She said, tapping a spoon on the counter.

“No.”
“No?” She said, her voice thick with indignation, “I see I will just have to go back to my mysterious, overly-complex plot for revenge. That is, unless you would rather I forgive you.”

“That’s blackmail!”

“Uh huh.”

It didn’t matter. She had already forgiven him. He could see it in her bright smile and hear it in her facetious tone, but even still he did not feel truly at ease. He wanted to hear her say it. “So it’s an ultimatum then? If I don’t try this, you will exact terrible revenge on me at some later date?”

“That’s right.”

“And if I do try it, you will forgive me and say you aren’t angry anymore?”

“Not at all.” She shook her head and pointed the spoon at him, “You aren’t getting off that easily.”

“I see.” He took the spoon from her suspiciously, “What else?”

“Just three things. Three measly little things.”

“How measly?” His tone was low, suspicious, and yet he knew he would do whatever she asked.

“First, you have to try this and give me your honest opinion.” She set her elbows on the bar and rested her cheeks on her hands as if about to enjoy some entertainment.

He grumbled irritably, for there was something highly unpleasant about eating while under the gaze of a dozen ill-wishers. He took the spoon and picked up the dish at once.

“And please savor, Lore.” She said with a devious smile, “This is no bitter strawberry.”

“Sure.” He muttered and placed a spoonful of dark, brown-green stew in his mouth. If he had meant to fabricate one reaction or another, it became wholly unnecessary. It was the best thing he had ever tasted. It had a soft, buttery taste, tempered by black pepper and the tangy flavor of some ingredient he could not identify.

“Yea or nay?” Hall asked as she studied his face intently.

This was the reason he did not eat. It screamed for instant repetition. He lowered the dish before he could be tempted to take another bite. “Yea.”

“Such high praise.” She smiled, “Thank you.”

In his peripheral vision Lore saw Larson turn away with a disgruntled sneer and move to join Blake and LaForge near the window.

“I don’t think your friends are pleased that you’re talking to me.” He offered, sliding the dish back toward her.

Hall looked up, “Oh. I promised John he would be the first for the stew.”

Lore smiled and considered taking the dish back to finish it off. He knew without a doubt that John Larson was the primary source of speeches against him, and that he had more than once tried to convince others that Lore should not be allowed in engineering. Lore felt a guilty pleasure at the
man’s current discomfort, and turned back to Hall. “Your second condition?”

“Mmm…my second condition….What should I do?” She took up the dish and ran it under her nose. “It does smell good.”

Lore scoffed at her teasing, though he was having more fun than he ever had, “You mean you haven’t already thought of these?”

“No. I have them all thought out. Remember what I said? There’s something to be said for suspense.”

“Or torture.”

“Exactly.” She smiled, took up the spoon, and ate a heaping bite of the stew.

Lore stared for a moment, struck. She had eaten from the same dish and spoon as he. Humans did not typically do that. “The second condition, Hall.” He insisted, playing up his irritation.

“Whatever you say, Soong.”

Lore’s eyes flashed wide. He had never been referred to by his father’s surname. It may have been accurate, by human custom, but something about it felt wrong. “That is not my name.”

Her face fell. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

He waved his hand instantly, shooing the topic away. It was he who was doing the apologizing today. “What is the second thing?”

She folded her hands on the bar, “You have to admit, right now, that you are my friend.”

“What?” He exclaimed. Surely she was joking! “That’s it?”

“You said in your quarters that I am not your friend. I want you to take it back, right now. And don’t think it’s some small thing.” She shook her head seriously, “You know what it means to be someone’s friend? It’s terrible! You have to listen to me ramble on when I’m boring you. You have to always pretend to like the food I make, regardless of how horrible it might be. You have to be nice even when you don’t feel like it.”

“It sounds like Hell.” He agreed, smiling at her teasing manner. “But I suppose I can handle it.” Oh! Gladly! He paused, “We are friends.”

A satisfied, almost mischievous grin former her lips, as if she had just gotten away with something valuable. “That’s two. Let’s move on to two-B.”

“B! No one said anything sub ultimatums. What kind of negotiator are you?”

“The kind that is winning. Just two more measly things, Lore.”

He looked up to the ceiling. Condition two had not been so bad. In fact, he was thrilled with it. What else could there be? “Fine.”

She took a deep breath and leaned close to the counter, “Don’t call me Hall.”

For a moment he was confused. Hall had a lot of friend, but even of those there were only a few who called her by her given name. “All right.”
She beamed. He kept a blank expression, something he had once been very good at, but which he was now finding increasingly difficult around her. He felt suddenly the intensity of the room on him, eyes watching his every move and trying to hear his every word. He wore a good façade, but feeling such happiness at her forgiveness felt like exposure.

“What’s wrong?” She asked after a moment, her voice much lower, for he had looked away from her and gripped the edge of the bar.

“Hall, I—”

“Anna.”

“Anna.” He laughed bitterly, “I’m glad that you’re not angry with me.” You have no idea! “But you’re treating this very lightly, and I don’t think you should.” He looked down at her hands again, which she promptly drew back. “I hurt you physically. Doesn’t that bother you? Aren’t you afraid that I’ll do it again?”

“Will you?”

“No!” He exclaimed.

“There it is, then.”

“But you ju—” He shook his head stubbornly, the frustration collapsing his words. He wanted to yell, but knew he could not lest he wanted a sudden one-way transport to the brig. “How can you just take my word for it like that? How can you let me get away with this just by—by agreeing to things I don’t even deserve?”

The slip of pure honestly did not escape Anna’s notice. Her cheeks went slightly pink. “What do you want me to do, Lore? You want me to yell at you? Should I tell you to go to Hell and never talk to me again?”

“Yes! That’s exactly what you should do!”

“Too bad!” She lowered her eyes, shrinking away from the volume of her voice, but she did not shrink back from him, “I am not going to give you whatever punishment it is you think you deserve, Lore. So you can forget about it. I forgive you.”

“No.” He shook his head, “Not just—”

“Yes. Just. Like. That.” She held his shifting eyes until he no longer looked away.

“Understood?”

He hesitated. It was too easy, but even for all his stubborn arrogance he could see that she was just as stubborn. “Understood.” He could hear the rising tide of the room behind him, their pleasant conversations broken by his presence and the increased animation of their conversation. He did not like the attention, but he disliked even more that Anna would have to deal with it. “I should go now.”

She nodded, begrudgingly it seemed, “I’ll save the third ultimatum for later. Don’t think I’ll forget.”

He rolled his eyes, “Humans forget things all the time. I’m betting on it.” He leaned forward to whisper, “Just tell them I’m bothering you about some engineering thing. It might save you some trouble.”
She gave him a curious look. “Sure.”

He nodded and stepped back from the bar, ready to make his escape as quickly as he had made his entrance.

“Oh, and Lore!” Anna called after him in a loud voice, “Engineering. Seven-thirty on the dot.”

He shook his head in stunned disapproval. *So much for lessening her trouble.* He only nodded before he turned and the doors opened to free him. Perhaps she had made a mistake by forgiving him. Perhaps he was making a mistake by going back to engineering. But perhaps—and this he suspected more than any other—he was just happy enough not to care either way.
Chapter 19

“Starfleet doesn’t look kindly on intruders.”

“Listen here, Starfleet. This is not the federation. You have no jurisdiction here!”

Riker glared down—far down—at the posturing Ferengi. The turbulent little man stood with his hands on his hips, bulbous head craning upward in absolute defiance. Data, who was standing a few feet from Riker’s side, was also not very enthused.

“Actually, Sir,” Data began, “Sayul Nor station fell under Federation jurisdiction eighty-seven days ago, under the armistice treaty signed by the Cardassian high authority.”

“Bah!” The Ferengi scoffed, and Riker actually balked as the spittle which flew from the man’s mouth. “So, you bring a nice walking encyclopedia with you and you think that gets you somewhere? Well, I run a business, see? And to run that business I need to be trusted, and giving personal information to Starfleet officers doesn’t exactly make me trust worthy.” He paused, and looked Data up and down in a hardly guarded manner. “It would cost me, financially, so…you can see how I simply can’t help you.”

Riker rolled his eyes back into his head and looked as if he would pick the man up and throw him. “All right. Maybe we can arrange something.” As much as they all hated the idea, it would not be the first time that they had engaged in bribery for information. Especially when the information sought was so valuable. “Now, have you received or seen delivered any Federation equipment in the last few days?”

Mr. Larn tapped his chin thoughtfully and glanced at Data again. “Perhaps. Although this is really a bartering economy, so latinum wouldn’t be very useful to me. Perhaps some rare item that would fetch a handsome price?”

Data starred at the man with frustrated, narrow eyes. Usually he was more accommodating when strangers took the fantastically insulting measure of attempting to buy him, but he was already in a bad mood. “I think you will find my resale exceedingly difficult, Sir. Have you seen any of the items described?”

“No.” Was the tart reply.

Data looked to Riker meaningfully. The Ferengi was lying. Internal scans on the station had already shown that the man’s personal warehouse contained no less than two federation shuttlecraft and a litany of engineering parts, none of which could have been obtained legally. And as much as Data was correct about Starfleet’s technical jurisdiction, they knew they had little legal recourse to get information from the man.

“In that case, we’ll just take our shuttles and our parts and we’ll be on our way.” Riker lifted his hand in an authoritative gesture, directing two of his security guards to move toward the back exit of the little shop.

Larn hopped out from behind his tall counter and blocked the doorway. His arms were raised in front of him in a clear indication of panic. “No, no! What do you think you’re doing? You can’t go
in there! That storage bay is my personal property!"

Riker smirked, for now he had the upper hand, even by Ferengi standards. “I’m afraid not, Mr. Larn. We spoke to the station manager, and it appears that you rent this space. And your land-lord was more than willing to allow us to get a search warrant. What will we find in there, Mr. Larn?”

Data, who always increased his hearing during such away missions, heard Larn’s heart stutter like an overworked engine. The man was so frustrated and helplessly trapped that he was unable to even utter an objection. Data stepped forward, “The federation shuttlecraft which you have in your possession are at least three years out of date. If you tell us where you got them, and who has been selling federation materials aboard this station, we will not confiscate them.”

Larn’s jaw dropped like a guillotine. “I—I don’t understand. You’ll let me keep them?”

Data looked at Riker, got the go ahead, and nodded.

“Well I—Perhaps I could, eh….” Larn darted his eyes to every corner of the room. The little shop, basically a mechanics warehouse for shuttle repair and rental, was an open space with a wide portico to the main promenade of the station. The many passersby on the promenade looked into the shop, wondering no doubt what a team of Starfleet officers were doing on Sayul Nor, and also wondering why a known con like Larn would be talking to them. Larn looked near to tears. “Please, you don’t understand.” He whispered, so low that Riker had to step forward, “Secrets are everything here. I—I could be killed for talking to you. After all, it’s just things, parts. No one gets killed, you know—”

“There are six dead science officers in our sickbay who would argue with that!” Riker retorted. “Where did you get them?”

The Ferengi pressed his hands over his cavernous ears and slumped, defeated. “Buel. Buel Kala.”

Data looked up, “Buel is a Bajoran name, Commander.” It was not what he had been expecting. He had hoped that Larn would indicate Reed as the supplier, but he knew it was unlikely—in fact, impossible—that Reed worked alone. “Are you familiar with her vessel?”

Larn shook his head like a rattle, “No, no. It’s always cloaked! She got a device from a Romulan freighter once —Oh! I shouldn’t have told you that!”

“When was the last time this woman, Buel, was here?” Riker pressed, leaning against the counter.

Larn’s mouth opened to answer right away, but he hesitated, and his eyes traced lines on the ceiling, “Yesterday, I think, or day before. But she’s gone now. Never sticks around, that one!”

Riker frowned and Data raised his brow curiously. For such a notorious con, Larn was a terrible liar. A group of people had assembled outside of Larn’s shop, starring in and mumbling recriminations between themselves. Data listened as a few speculated that Larn was a Starfleet collaborator and always had been, while another few were sure he was playing them for fools and giving them bad information.

Riker sighed and drew back. It was clear that what information they really needed was not going to be gained here. Larn was clearly too afraid to tell them anything useful and it was doubtful if he would know in any case. After all, it would be highly unlikely that any criminal would trust a Ferengi with sensitive information to begin with. Riker took a few steps toward the man, leaning
over him, “Thanks for the help, Mr. Larn. If we need anything, we’ll be back.”

Larn swallowed once and scurried back behind his counter, but before he had the chance to feign absorption in a pile of latinum slips, Data approached the counter. “Did you ever see anyone else with Buel?” He probed. It was best to be vague.

Larn considered deeply, and finally must have decided that such information could not harm him. “Just a real quiet one. A Vulcan. Can you believe that? A Vulcrawler!”

Data nodded and turned away to join Riker and the rest of the away team.

“What do you think?” Riker said under his breath as the team stepped out into the gawking maze of the promenade.

Data considered. As far as information was concerned, he knew as much as Riker did, but he did not think that concrete evidence was Riker’s objective. He wanted to know what Data felt. What was his gut instinct?

“If we discover that Buel Kala is real, I do not believe that she is the leader of the piracy operation. It is Reed.”

Riker’s eyes widened, for he was not used to Data jumping to such conclusions. In fact, Data never leapt to any conclusions of any kind. “Why do you say that?”

He shook his head, “I do not have quantifiable proof for my assertion, Sir. But I do not believe a well organized criminal enterprise would allow a subordinate to be left behind and captured by a rescuing ship. When we found Reed in the escape pod, I do not believe it was an accident. I believe he was there to be found.”

Riker jaw clenched a little. “A Trojan horse. The first victim sends out a distress call, someone comes, and there’s Reed to help do the same thing to the next ship.”

Data nodded, “However, I do not believe that Reed expected to be rescued by the Federation flagship, which is why he no doubt aborted any initial attempt to take the ship.”

Riker shook his head and pursed his lips. “That could be why Diana couldn’t read anything from him. He was prepared for the fact that he might encounter telepaths.” Riker looked at Data, “Any luck finding any information on Narok Reed? I know Troi’s been at it for two days.”

Data hesitated, for he had in fact found something that morning that he had intended to bring to Counselor Troi upon his return to the ship, and it brought to him vivid memories that he wished he could forget. “Perhaps. I can still find no reference to the name Narok Reed, but there is an instance of Lydia Reed, a Federation doctor. She was killed on Ohniaka III.”

Riker exhaled heavily. He had been among the away team that had discovered the blood-bath on Ohniaka III. It was there that the rogue Borg whom Lore had discovered and manipulated murdered nearly three hundred Starfleet and civilian personnel. He could recall almost perfectly the broken windows and windswept corridors, some impassible with bodies. He nodded, bringing himself back, “Reed said that Lore killed his wife. He just kept saying that. You think this Lydia Reed could be the one?”

Data nodded and looked away. He too had vivid memories of Ohniaka III, and they troubled him for more than the reasons they troubled Riker. It was on Ohniaka III that one of Lore’s Borg had initiated a transmission that caused Data to dive into indescribable rage, the first emotion he had ever felt. Even now, after years of his emotion chip being a part of his daily life, he could not
forgive Lore for making anger his first emotional experience.

They continued to walk through the parting sea of people as they neared the main docking ring. *Sayul Nor*, in a remarkable dichotomy, was a lawless station with some incredibly well enforced rules. Transporters were strictly prohibited and disabled by a station wide dampening field, giving no one except station security personnel the ability to transport into or around the station. In addition to that difficulty, the chief constable had informed Picard that station officials honored absolutely no outside jurisdictions or warrants, meaning that the most reprobate and ruthless of criminals could board the station without any fear of extradition.

“God, I can’t wait to get away from this place.” Riker muttered under his breath as they were forced to walk through a group of towering, glaring Nausicaans.

Data did not say it, but he had to agree. The station was dark, almost prohibitively so, for it appeared that every other light was either smashed out or had merely stopped working. But Data knew it was hardly the aesthetic imperfections that elicited Riker’s opinion. Everyone knew the reputation of *Sayul Nor*. He had often heard other officers refer to the place as Sodom and Gomorrha, and with good reason. With an average daily occupancy of nearly twenty thousand, there were no less than three or four murders a day aboard the station, and those were merely the one’s the constables had discovered and bothered to report. People, especially women, went missing on the station all the time, and it was feared by Starfleet intelligence that the Orions may have set up an auxiliary slave trade there.

As they neared the docking ring and Data stepped aside to let a Bajoran cleric pass, Riker stopped. “Reed may not even be in the area any more. Do you think it’s a possibility that seeing Lore gave him every reason to head for the hills?”

“That is a possibility.” Data agreed, but that new found sense of uncertainly plagued him. “Of course, the opposite could also be true.”

They deactivated the shielding with a silent pass code and stepped into the airlock with sober expressions.

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Buel Kala tossed back the hood of her robe and starred after the Starfleet officers as they boarded their ship and disappeared. She had been called many things in her life, most of them true, but no one had ever dared to call her stupid. She saw in an instant what must have happened on the *Enterprise*, why Reed had ruined the best prize they could have ever taken. *Coward!* She gritted her teeth and peered through the glass of the airlock to catch the last glimpse of the Starfleet android. Like every person that did not live under a rock, she knew who Lt. Commander Data was. She also knew that he was not the only one, that there had been another android with white skin and gold eyes, and that he had not been nearly as pleasant. But, unlike most, she also knew the history between Reed and Lore. Certainly she was no fool! She had done her background research before joining Reed’s crew, and she knew all about his former life in the Federation. She also knew that Lore was in some box back on Earth and nowhere near the *Enterprise*!

She clenched her fists again. * Fucking coward!* If Reed had just done what he supposed to do the
first time, she would not have to be risking life and limb now to get the prize they should have gotten days ago. It would have been so easy then. All he had to do was stay on board and play his part, but the damn fool had panicked at the sight of some machine. And not even *the* machine, just one that looked like it!

Buel snarled to herself and darted back against the airlock. As soon as they reactivated the shield from inside she would have what she needed. From under her robes she produced a small short range sensor and pressed it against the bulked. The shield fizzed into place in an almost imperceptible blue haze, and the shield modulations ran across the tiny screen to the millionth of a decimal.

“Perfect.” She pulled her sleeve back to reveal her communicator and pressed it. “I’m sending you the shield modulation now. Standing by.” Buel smirked at her own coolness. Reed apparently did not think it important that anyone know why he had fled the *Enterprise*, and she saw no reason to let him know that she had found out. It would be just one more piece of ammunition to use against him when her time finally came. After all, no one wanted to be led by a coward.

There was no reply, just as planned, and she stood still as the transporter beam consumed her and the docking ring disappeared. She knew it would be only a few minutes at most before the *Enterprise* computer noted her presence and sounded the alarm, but it was more than enough time for her simple task. Besides, what was life without a little thrill now and then? As the beam rematerialized, Buel imagined how she would tell the story of how she had infiltrated the Federation Flagship.

But she did not materialize in a vacant lab or unoccupied crew quarters as she had thought she would. Instead, Buel darted back as soon as her legs would move and pressed her back to the bulked. She was in the corridor; a large, well-lit, corridor!

“But I’m in the damn corridor, Reed! You screwed up the transport!” She slid along the bulked and tucked herself into the alcove of a doorway, but it did not open. She darted her eyes both ways in rapid succession, convinced that at any moment a security team would come running.

“Impute the codes, Buel.” Came an icy voice.

“Are you deaf! Get me—”

“If you don’t impute the codes on that ship, don’t come back to this one. Do I make myself clear?”

Her hands shook in a spasm of rage. She had nothing; no weapons, no latinum, no ship. He had her, and she knew it. Clenching her teeth so hard that her jaw ached, she walked down the corridor with the distracted air of someone fascinated by their surroundings. If she was caught, her only hope would be to feign ignorance, to pretend that she was some touristy locale who had inadvertently gained access. Of course she knew it was ridiculous. Not even Starfleet officers were that stupid. She reached the sharp curve in the corridor and listened before peering around.

Up head she saw on the bulked a dark glass panel with several active indicator lights. It was a simple computer access point with only the most basic system access, but it was all she needed. With her fingers poised, she darted around the corner in a reckless flash. Her hands never wavered
as she entered the fourteen point code, perfectly memorized, and stepped back. The screen did nothing, then a sudden chaotic flash lit the panel yellow, and every symbol, letter, number, and other information character known scrolled across the screen in a manic display. She actually took another step back, never having seen Reed’s genius at work.

The chaotic scroll of symbols froze, paralyzed, and vanished. The standard information display reappeared as if nothing had happened.

Buel turned, her communicator in hand, and prepared for the beam to consume her, but as she turned she was slapped with the kind of panic that could not be cured with flight or fight. It was the kind of panic that comes in an instant when multiple facts fall together and the amazing speed of the humanoid mind combines them to form a perfect truth. The truth was that the android now approaching her was not wearing a Starfleet uniform and was not twelve decks away near the docking port. The truth was that this android could not possibly be the same one that she had just seen in the docking ring.

*This can’t be happening.* She continued to stare, frozen in place as Lore finally caught her eye and his expression changed from one of mild contentment to snide disapproval. He starred back at her, his eyes narrowed in a challenge.

“What are you staring at?” He balked as his pace slowed and he looked her over with a mild curiosity.

Buel was speechless, her communicator clutched in her hands like a stone. It was not Data. Reed had not panicked because he was mistaken; he had panicked because he was right!

Lore waited for her gawking to subside, but when it did not he merely rolled his eyes in disgust and moved to pass her. He looked back absently, “You might want to think about finding the docking port, *Cleric.* Starfleet doesn’t look kindly on intruders.”

Buel starred after him as he vanished around the corner. It was several seconds before she regained herself and lifted the communicator to her lips, but she hesitated. Reed knew what was on this ship, and yet he had shown so much determination to have it. It did not make sense to her. If he had been frightened enough to flee this android, why would he be so determined to possess the ship now?

She gritted her teeth again and pressed the communicator, “It’s done. Get me out of here.”

As the beam consumed her and the nice, clean space of the *Enterprise* corridor disappeared, Buel made a decision. If revenge was profitable, she was for it. If not, it would be the last mission Reed ever led.
Chapter 20

“You don’t care about anyone but yourself, and you never have.”

“Oh, come on! You’ll like sky diving, trust me. It’s great.” Kendrick followed close on the heels of a young, blonde Ensign, his eyes glowing like a child’s. “Come with me.”

The lady, smiling indulgently shrugged her shoulders and looked down. “Okay. Eighteen hundred hours?”

“Eighteen hundred hours.” He echoed, voice full of silly glee. The lady departed with her tool case into the junction room and Kendrick practically hopped back to his station at the center console. Blake gave him a silent nod of congratulations, while LaForge laughed and shook his head.

Amazing. Lore laughed to himself as he kept his eyes firmly on the open deck plate in front of him. It was amazing what he could see when he actually paid attention. The whole tone and demeanor of the crew had altered significantly in the three days since leaving Sayul Nor. While there, everyone, even the usually casual Geordie LaForge, seemed nervously on edge. But, the away teams had discovered nothing and with no other leads to go on the Enterprise had been forced to continue the humdrum schedule of the Federation flagship.

No one seemed to mind.

He ducked away from the open grate and came back to the center control table, stepping agilely over another open grate and a few tool cases. Main engineering was a mess. Since the Enterprise had resumed its bout of boring, diplomatic missions, LaForge had decided that it was time to finally overhaul the connectors in the plasma control system. It was the most intrusive task on the list, and main engineering looked more like something being destroyed than repaired. He grabbed a few isolinear clamps from the table and maneuvered his way back to the open grate. As he did, he noted with some satisfaction that no one watched him. No one noted his every move with trepidation or analyzed what tools he took and which he put back. No one had done that in weeks, and Lore was starting to think that maybe Anna was right. Maybe they were ‘getting used to him’.

Of course, this made his vanity bristle. Better to be feared than ignored.

He knelt down next to the grate again and looked over his shoulder at the entrance. Anna had told him that she would be late that morning, for some other official duty occupied her. He was fine, of course, for he did not really need help with anything that he did. Still, he would prefer her gentle conversation to the silence. She told stories, and demanded that he tell some as well, a feat that was not easy considering that the majority of his past did not lend itself to pleasant story telling. But he tried, and she listened, and he liked it. Hell, she even made him laugh sometimes.

The sound of heavy feet on the carpet drew his attention and he turned to look. Anna appeared around the corner with Larson fast at her side. She was moving much faster than her usual gate, and her expression was a solid frown.

“It’s not that bad.” Larson assured her with a laugh. “Come on, it could happen to anyone.”
Anna stopped at the control tables and gathered up an odd collection of tools, “Easy for you to say, Mr. Six-foot-two!”

Larson released a small chuckle again, as if he truly wanted to laugh but was holding it back, “You weren’t the only one, Anna. You’ll try again—”

“Yes I was the only one!” She retorted, her cheeks turning a flushed pink. “No one else failed to get a single hit. No one else got pinned.” She gritted her teeth, “No one else got beaten up!”

What? Lore stood now and took a step forward over a tool chest. “Beaten up?” He looked at Larson with the same loathsome glare he always gave him. “What are you talking about?”

Anna sighed and rubbed her flushed cheeks with one hand. “It’s nothing. Forget it.”

Larson shook his head, “She failed her security evaluation.”

“John!” She cried, smacking the table.

LaForge looked up from his work at the end of the table, “Really? Worf is usually pretty lenient with the engineering people.”

Anna groaned and spilled her collection of tools into an empty case. “Thanks, Commander.”

Lore came to Anna’s side, “What’s the security evaluation?”

“Nothing. Just forget it.” She snapped the case shut and turned, almost tripping over another case on the floor. “I’m not a security officer anyway.”

Larson shrugged and gave Lore a meaningful glance “Maybe Commander Worf thinks you should be at the higher standard.”

What the hell does that mean? Lore stepped toward the table, about to speak, when Anna grabbed his arm.

“Come on. There’s a fluctuating power relay in section two and three. And six. This damn ship is falling apart!”

“I haven’t finished with the plasma control system.” He said, looking down at the open grate.

“Later. Come on.” She mumbled. He followed while Larson continued to look after them with his eyes narrowed in nasty disapproval. It wasn’t until they were secluded in the junction room and in the Jefferies tube that she released his arm.

“What’s the security evaluation?” He asked again, “Is it something important?”

She shook her head and settled down in front of an open panel. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

He knelt next to her and pulled the tool case to his side. He frowned with a kind of sad petulance. “You spoke to Larson about it.”

Anna looked at him with a little surprise. “I’m sorry. I just….” She sighed, “The security evaluation is self defense, combat. I passed marksmanship, but I failed hand to hand combat.”

Lore starred at her while she kept her eyes fixed on the panel in front of her with perfect stillness as if she did not wish to look at him. He frowned and considered the many years Anna had already been in Starfleet. Had she ever failed such a basic test before? He did not think that would
make sense. Why then had she failed now? She was not any less physically capable than the other human women aboard.

Unless…

Lore clenched his jaw and leaned away from her. “Your wrists. You failed because of your hands, didn’t you?”

She said nothing, but only pressed her lips together in an uncomfortable grimace.

“You have to go to sickbay.” He said at once.

“No. My hands were just a little sore. I couldn’t make adequate blows—.”

“You can’t just ignore it. What’s going to happen to you for failing this test?”

“It’s nothing.”

“What’s going to happen to you?” He said again, and put his hand over the screen of her tricorder.

“Fine. I’ll be put on probation until I pass. I can’t go on away missions, I can’t set foot on non-federation ports, and I won’t have a battle stations assignment.” She looked up at him finally, “Until I can prove that I can defend myself, I am an unreliable officer. Are you happy?”

Lore flinched as if he had been struck. He was more than used to feeling guilt by now, but he was not used to embarrassment. He reached toward the panel and pulled the relay out with a twist.

“No, I’m not happy.”

Anna groaned and dropped her face in her hands, “No, I didn’t mean that. I meant happy that I had to tell you. I didn’t want to tell you.”

“Why?” He retorted, angry with himself, “This is my fault, and now you’ve gotten yourself in trouble for trying to protect me. Anna, go to sickbay and get your wrist treted. Then you’ll pass your test and everything will be fine.”

“Everything will not be fine!” She cried, “I already told you—”

“I’ll tell them myself if you don’t.” His voice was icy calm. It was the only way he could keep from slamming his fist through the bulked in a rage. He deserved whatever happened. He only hoped that Anna did not try to defend him and further ruin her place with the crew.

She sat back on her haunches and dropped the tricorder into the box. “They won’t believe you. I’ll deny it.”

“Anna!”

“You don’t understand, Lore. Yes, my hands hurt and that caused me to lose a couple of shots, but…but that’s not the only reason. I probably would have failed anyway. I’ve failed before.”

He looked at her sideways, “If you’re trying to make me feel better—”

“I’m not a good fighter. I never have been. So much of it relies of brute strength, and I just don’t have it. Commander Worf told me I shouldn’t even bother, that I should just except limited duty until the day comes that I can pass, but I’m not going to be some half-officer. I refuse.” She turned her face away and pressed her lips together. The petulant pose made her look younger than
she already did.

Lore pressed her with a curious, confused look. He ran his eyes over her whole frame and was baffled. She did not appear any weaker than any other female member of the crew. At five foot seven, she was a very respectable height for a human woman, and he had seen many other women aboard who were shorter and slighter than she.

“I don’t understand. If you’re weak, couldn’t you just…” He sighed and felt ridiculous at lecturing a human on physical fitness. “Couldn’t you just increase your muscle mass through exercise? Isn’t that what humans do?”

“Yeah, that’s what humans do, but it won’t make any diff—” She trailed off and tilted her head in a curious fashion, as if something new had just occurred to her. “Lore, how old do you think I am?”

He frowned, “Twenty-four? Twenty-five? I don’t know.”

There was a stunned pause, and then Anna collapsed into a fit of laughter. It rang off the walls like chaotic music, and she let her face finally fall into her hands as she continued to laugh through her fingers.

“What the hell is so funny?” He balked, for he was sure this was some ploy to make him forget about her injured hands.

“Sorry. I had no idea you didn’t know. How many twenty-four year old Lieutenants have you met?”

Now he was utterly confused, and merely let his hands fall in his lap with a defeated air.

“I’m sorry.” She said over chuckles that still shook her, “Lore, I’m not human. I’m half human, and half El’Aurian.”

His raised a curious brow, “El’Aurian? Guinan is El’Aurian.”

Anna nodded. “And she just celebrated her five hundred and second birthday.”

He smirked, “Then how old are you? Don’t tell me you’re older than me.”

She smiled at that and picked her tricorder up again. “I’m forty-three. And to go back to what I was saying before, El’Aurians mature differently than humans. We’re actually pretty weak until we’re in our fifities or sixties. That’s why no one has ever met a young El’Aurian. They’re very closely protected.”

“And yet you’re in Starfleet. I wouldn’t call that protective.”

“Well, I wasn’t raised by El’Aurians.” She said with a shrug, and began capping off the exposed wires in the panel. “I was on a transport ship that was struck by an asteroid in the Marzden sector when I was just an infant. My parents were killed, and they couldn’t find any next-of-kin on my mother’s side, so I was sent to Earth to live with my father’s family. But they weren’t…eh…interested in becoming parents, so I was adopted by another family.”

Her voice was calm and almost unnaturally level, and she mixed awkward smiles where they did not belong. Lore recognized a cover when he saw one. He had questions, but none he dared to ask. He said the only thing that came to mind. “I was never a child.”
She gave him an almost sad smile, “Never? I know you wouldn’t have been physically, but was there never a time when you had to learn things?”

He laughed bitterly, “If that’s the definition, than yes.”

She smiled again with an excited glint in her eye. “Like what? What weren’t you good at when you were first…born?”

Lore sighed. He wanted to learn about her, and now the conversation had turned to him once more. Of course, now that he knew she was an *El’Aurien*, the race of listeners, it made more sense.

“I had to learn to wear clothing. And I had trouble controlling my strength. I shattered every glass Dr. Soogn owned.”

Her smile widened joyously. “Clothing? You had to learn to wear clothing?”

He shrugged and shifted his eyes. “I don’t have to wear clothes because I don’t suffer from the elements, and I couldn’t figure out what the colonist considered proper clothing, so I figured it made more sense to not wear clothes.” He frowned, “That didn’t work out.”

“Oh!” She cupped her hand over her mouth and laughed, her cheeks turning curiously red. “You walked around naked?”

He nodded. “Dr. Soogn had to install a modesty sub-routine so I wouldn’t want to do such things. Actually, I think he had to do the same to Data.”

She continued to smirk, “What did the colonists say?”

“Oh, no.” He shook his head, shutting down that line of questioning immediately. He went another route. “What are you going to do about your test?”

She was obviously disappointed by his return to the subject, but she did not resist. “I don’t know. I’m certainly not going to sickbay, if you’re going to suggest that again, because it won’t make much difference.”

He started to argue but decided against it. He had already seen how stubborn she could be, and he had no reason to believe this would be any different. There had to be another way. “How did you pass this test before?”

She cringed. “The first three years, when I was an ensign, I was stationed at the Utopia Planetia shipyards, and they only required security personnel to pass. Then on the *Landrew*, the security chief conducted the tests despite having the Ciarien Flu, so that went easier for me. And on the Charleston….” Here she rolled her eyes and looked away from him. “The security chief was a childhood friend of John’s, and I know he was letting me pass because of him.”

Lore’s attentive expression was reduced to a grumbling frown. Larson again. “He had another officer falsify your test results so that he could gain favor with you?”

“Well, don’t give him all the blame. I took advantage of it, didn’t I? It was better than failing.” She shook her head, “I just don’t have the strength. Commander Worf held me down with one hand. One! It was humiliating.”

Lore imagined the domineering Klingon pressing Anna into a gym mat with one hand. He had the sudden urge to return the gesture, although to do so he would no doubt have to break the Security Chief’s collar bone. He shook off the idea and looked at Anna to once again note the
subtle melancholy that seemed to wash out her happy features. Away missions were not particularly important to engineers, and he would think that most humans with a sense of self preservation would like not having a battle stations assignment anyway, but regardless of what he thought it was clear that she wanted those things.

“I’ll help you pass.”

Her frown remained for a moment, but soon spread into a mischievous grin, “You’re going to teach me how to fight, Lore?”

He gave her a devilish smile, “Absolutely.”

“I hope you have some tricks, because force isn’t going to work.”

Lore rolled his eyes up to the ceiling and savored a memory with clear relish. “Don’t worry. Worf isn’t impossible to incapacitate. Believe me.”

Her jaw dropped. “Did you…ever?”

_Damnit._ His exuberance fell a few rungs and he wished he had kept his mouth shut. “I regret why I did it, but I can’t really say I regret it entirely. After all, he doesn’t like me and the feeling is mutual.”

She only nodded a few times and turned back to the panel. They had spent enough time together for Anna to recognize when she was treading onto unstable ground. Considering that the vast majority of his past was a minefield, it made sometimes for awkward walking. “My retake can be this evening, if I choose.” She said.

“Good. After the shift, we’ll go to the gym and see what we can do.” He gave her a playfully disgusted frown and looked her over. “Of course, I don’t know how much we can do with an immature El’Aurien.”

“Lore….”She shook her head and sighed, “Shut up.”

*                      *                      *

The gym was occupied after Hall’s shift ended, and so they decided to go to the holodeck to work on the odd venture. At least it was odd to Lore. He had never taught a person how to fight. In fact, he had never taught anyone how to do anything. Certainly the Borg did not count. Instructing other creatures how to become ruthless killers just didn’t seem to belong in the category of learning. In any case, he was about to witness his teaching skills first hand, and he was not very optimistic.

Anna stood on the mat in front of a towering Klingon, very similar in height and weight to Commander Worf. She held her hands out in front of her in a stance that would not scare a child.

“Don’t worry. I’ve decreased his physical strength. I want to be able to see how you fight without that being an issue.” He said from the edge of the mat. It was a good place to start at least. The Omicron Theta colonist had had a school, and he remembered that teachers would test a student before deciding how to go about teaching them something. If it worked for them….
Anna’s anxious face broke into a silly grin, “Tell me this doesn’t look as ridiculous as I think it does.”

He looked from Anna to the towering Klingon and smiled, “Alright.”

“Thanks.” She muttered and took a few steps forward, her sock-covered toes gripping the mat.

“Just try to get over him. Pin him down first.”

“Oh, sure.” She laughed, “No problem.”

“Computer, begin program.”

The Klingon came to life in an instant and launched himself toward her. Anna stepped back, which was her first mistake, and tried to block the assault by lifting her hands in front of her face. The Klingon issued a punch towards her face, which was certainly not what Lore had expected the program to do, and she ducked under it with agile speed. She pressed her hands forward, but instead of punching him in the stomach as she should have done, it appeared that she was merely trying to push him over.

“Don’t be nice!” Lore shouted from the side, “Do everything you can.”

But it was too late for her to reformulate her defensive strategy, and the Klingon swiped his leg under her, sending her backward onto the mat with a painful yelp. The Klingon stepped forward over her, ready to finish his victory, when Lore grabbed the hologram by the back of the collar and tossed him across the mat into a heap.

“Computer, freeze.”

Anna rolled onto her knees, “I thought you said you reduced its strength.”

“I did.” He said, “By twenty five percent.”

She regained her feet in a huff and tried to push her dislodged hair from her face. “Maybe I wasn’t clear when I said I don’t have any upper body strength. My fourteen year old cousin can still beat me at arm wrestling!”

Lore looked at the still figure of the Klingon and grimaced. Maybe he was a bit over his head here. He wanted her to pass, and he certainly wanted to be the one to help her, but he could not change the laws of physics and he certainly could not change Worf’s standards.

Maybe I won’t have to.

“We can still do this. I guarantee it.”

She untwisted the tunic of her uniform with a violent, frustrated motion. “Oh, sure! And maybe Captain Picard will make you ship’s counselor.”

He stared at her.

“Sorry.” She took a deep breath and turned her eyes up to the ceiling. “This just….It makes me so angry. No one trusts a weak person. They start to question their ability to do everything. This thing, it feels like the only thing I’ve never been able to handle. You have no idea what it’s like to be weak.”

He met her eyes evenly. “No, I don’t. But I do know what it’s like to have everyone’s mistrust.
It isn’t pleasant.” He tilted his head, remembering one of the teachers on Omicron Theta. It had been the teacher that all the colony children despised. “Do you want me to tell you how to pass, or do you want to quit and be angry?”

Anna balked, not expected that at all, and gave him an angry look. “I want to pass, obviously.”

“Fine. Computer, reset.” He walked past and took her former position on the mat. He stood with no defensive stance or any apparent preparation. “Computer, begin program.”

The Klingon rose from his dismal place on the mat and wielded around to face his opponent. He rushed forward with the same raging intensity as before, and just as before Lore duplicated Anna’s first mistake. He dropped down to avoid a blow to the head, but instead of trying to push the Klingon over he wielded his right arm around and struck the hologram high on its side, just inches below the armpit.

The Klingon’s face contorted into a spasm of pain so severe that it did not even cry out, but merely stumbled back several steps and fell to the mat in a heap, clutching the wounded area like a child wailing over a skinned knee. Anna stared down at the figure in amazement, for virtually no one but a Klingon mother had ever seen one of the warrior species behave so. It was unnatural, unexpected, and pitiful.

“There.” Lore said simply as he stood up and retook a stance next to her off the mat. “Simple as that.”

She looked at him sideways. “Simple as what? I don’t have that kind of force. Did you break his ribs or just cave in his lung?”

“Neither.” He replied. “I didn’t use any more force than you’re capable of. Maybe even a little less.”

She scoffed.

“Come here, I’ll explain. Computer, reset stance.”

The Klingon vanished from its crying position on the ground and rematerialized in a frozen stance. Lore stopped in front of it and waited for Anna to join him. The confusion on her face was making the whole enterprise more fun by the second.

“Klingons have a large nerve bungle high under their arms. It’s a little further back than where humans have lymph nodes.” He laughed, “It’s the dirty little secret of the fierce warriors. Adrenaline paralyzes it, so during an actual fight it isn’t much of an Achilles heel, but…..” He pointed a finger at Anna and tapped the tip of her nose. “I don’t think Worf is going to get very worked up about having to fight you.”

She smiled and waved his hand away, “Gee, thanks.”

“Look at it this way. His confidence in your inabilities will be his down fall.” He smiled wide and he pointed his finger as if he would tap her nose again.

“Hey, quit it!”

She grabbed his hand in a playful fashion and pulled it away from her face. She did not let go right away, but held his hand for what seemed a few moments too long, and Lore looked down at his paper white hand next to her peaches and cream fingers.
Anna dropped his hand and turned around suddenly, looking up at the Klingon. “I’m not sure if I can do that to Commander Worf. It seems a little underhanded.”

Lore looked at his hand and shrugged. *Humans….*

Such a thing had occurred to Lore, for he knew she would not want to hurt someone, but a test of combat skills might exclude any other method. “Klingons undergo pain sticks on their birthday, Anna. Besides, I think Worf will appreciate your ingenuity. Is this not a real test of your ability to defend yourself?”

She nodded.

“Then he shouldn’t be surprised when you do.”

Uncertainty was written on her face. “Will this hurt him?”

“No. Clearly it will be painful, but there won’t be any lasting damage.”

Anna took a few steps around the hologram as if she was examining it, but her eyes were far beyond it. He noted her distraction and wondered if she was thinking on the same thing that he was. Larson’s words rang in his head, as they had since that morning, and he could not help but suspect they could be true.

“What do you think Worf may still fail you in this test even if you do this?”

Anna looked up at him, “I don’t see how he could.”

“He could if Larson was right.” He replied, “In case you haven’t noticed, Anna, I’m not the most popular thing to ever set foot on this ship.”

“No.” She crossed her arms and took a step toward him, “Commander Worf wouldn’t do that.”

“Never underestimate the power of hatred.” He said with a bitter laugh. “I knocked him out and left him in the doorway of a turbo-lift. Things like that tend to effect people.” He wasn’t blaming Worf, oddly enough, for he could imagine that he might do something very similar. One of the reasons he found it so hard to trust any of the crew was because they were unwavering allies of Data, and Data was not on his favorites list.

“Don’t worry about that.” She said. “If I have to accept limited duty, I will. It’s what everyone thinks I should do anyway.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“*Worf to Lieutenant Hall.*”

Anna took a steady breath and tapped her badge. “Go ahead, Sir.”

“I am prepared for your reevaluation. Meet me in the gymnasium.”

“Understood. Hall out.”

Lore frowned at the security chief’s clipped tone. He now had little doubt that Anna would fail this test, and it would be his fault. As much as that infuriated him to the very core, a strange part of him was almost relieved. If Anna were forced to be on limited duty she would never encounter the danger of away missions, nor risk being a specific target of hostile intruders. A sense of guilty happiness washed over him. It would be far less likely that he would ever have to be without her.
“Wish me luck.” She said as she stepped toward the door and pulled her hair back in a severe bun.

He smiled in a sad, guilty way. “You won’t need it. I’m sure.”

***

Lore pressed his back against the bulked and sidestepped into the gymnasium without a sound. The entrance came next to a tall set of structured bleachers, blocking from those on the mat any view of the door. It would be difficult to see everything, but sometimes words are louder than actions. The first sound he heard was a body hitting the padded floor.

“You attempt to use force you do not have!” Worf instructed in a deep boom. “A weak warrior must be a smarter warrior!”

There was a brief shuffle of fabric on the padded floor, followed by another dull thud and Anna’s frustrated groan.

*Come on, Anna. Don’t be nice.*

“Attack!”

Anna’s only advantage was on surprise, not a frontal assault. Lore’s curiosity became uncontrollable, and he peered around the corner. Knowing what would happen did not make it easier to watch. Worf was on one knee with his arm locked across Anna’s chest. So confident was he in her inability to inflict injury that he did not even bother to secure her desperately striking arms. It was the perfect position from which to break a person’s neck with one quick twist, a fact that Worf was no doubt attempting to show her.

“If you cannot defend yourself, then you cannot defend this ship!” Worf growled and jerked her back until she fell off her knees and on to her backside. Her face was red with rage and she struggled violently to wedge her hand under his arm. From his place near the bleachers, Lore could see the desperate frustration written on her. The rage was making her fight with force rather than skill, for Worf’s right arm was raised across her chest now, leaving his side entirely exposed to her struggling right arm.

Lore stepped forward, fighting the urge to leap out and defend her, or at the very least tell her to strike!

Worf kept his hold and hauled Anna to her feet. She gasped and began struggling to turn around, the last thing she should try to do.

“A warrior in battle is only as reliable as his comrades! You are a threat to this ship, Hall! You do not belong here!”

“No!” Anna’s enraged struggles reached such intensity that Lore feared she would hurt herself, and he did not know how much longer he could bear to remain still.

Worf continued, “You have no strength! Use your rage against your opponent!” With a quick, brutal motion, he swiped her feet out from under her. He went down with her, barely losing his hold.

Anna’s eyes swelled with angry self-defeat, and she turned her face up to cry out.
Worf paused for a moment and drew a deep breath. “You cannot defend this ship. You befriend its enemies.” Another pause, “You are a traitor!”

_Bastard!_ Lore’s fingers dug into the bleacher wood, crushing it like chalk. Still, he froze in place. It was at that moment that Anna clenched her eyes shut in an icy rage and flung her elbow back as hard as she could. It struck Worf high under his right arm, perfectly.

“Brah!” Worf reeled back, his arms flying away from her as if she were on fire. He clutched his side and growled like a caged animal as Anna struggled forward and spun around on her feet.

“Traitor? Traitor!” She screamed down at him. She clenched her eyes shut in a rage and looked close to tears. “You want to fail me, _Sir_, fine! But don’t you doubt for a second that I am dedicated to this ship and everyone on it!”

Lore pulled back and pressed his forehead to the hard wood of the bleachers. It felt wrong to watch her, like an intrusion. He should not have gone there. He waited for her hurried footsteps to come toward the door, but they did not. Instead, he heard a sound that came most unexpected; the roar of Worf’s laughter.

“Ha! You _are_ a warrior!” He proclaimed. His laughs echoed like the smack of a kettle drum, and Anna took a defensive step back as he rose, sure that he would exact retribution. “A true warrior only fights his enemies. This, I believe, is your way, Lieutenant.”

Anna took another step back. Her brow was wrinkled in confusion and her breath was heavy. “What?”

Worf stood finally with a grunting effort that he almost seemed to enjoy and stretched his arms wide. He was clearly still in pain, and yet not angry. “I had to _become_ your enemy, Lieutenant, and I believe that I achieved that.”

“You…you didn’t mean anything you said?” She breathed in disbelief, and her hands fell like sacks of flour.

“No, I did not.” Worf stood up straight and folded his arms across his chest, “You are a fine officer, Hall. When the time comes that your physical limitations subside, I believe you will be a finer one still.”

Lore’s curiosity got the best of him, and he finally stretched his face over the bleachers, just high enough to see.

“Did I hurt you, _Sir_?” Anna asked. Clearly she found the question as silly as someone else might.

“Bah! Pain is nothing. It will merely remind me that warriors do come in many guises.” Worf continued, “Your plan showed ingenuity, a clear desire to _know_ your opponent. When we cannot overcome our enemies, we must get around them, and I believe you have demonstrated that today. I will reinstate you to full active duty.”

It was novel, strange, and so wonderful to feel happiness for another that Lore did not even bother to note the newness of it. He merely savored the idea of how happy she would be when she told him.

“Thank you, _Sir_.” Said Anna, and the sound of her feet shuffling from the mat to the carpeted floor made Lore slide back against the bulked. He did not want to be seen there, least of all by her.
“Sir?” Anna’s feet paused.

“Yes, Lieutenant.”

“Sir, did you not mean *anything* you said? About me befriending enemies?”

Worf, for all his hulking brawn and fierce demeanor, was no stranger to empathy, and he stopped to give Anna a serious look. “Lieutenant, I will not tell you things which you already know. If you believe, truly, that Lore is not the person that he was, than allow no one to force actions upon you.” Worf then frowned with an undeniable sneer, “I simply do not *like* him! He is an arrogant, sarcastic *patack!*”

Lore pressed his lips together and laughed. *I love you too, Worf.* As much as he longed to stay and listen further, the sound of their approaching feet sent him to the door in a few long strides. They might hear the door open, and so as soon as he made his way into the corridor he went quickly around the corner and toward the turbo lift. He walked faster than he should for the sake of concealment, but there was something about exceptional glee that makes people move fast.

Lore stepped into the lift with a satisfied smile, and hardly noticed when the lift shuddered and stalled before finally moving. Minor technical malfunctions were not going to ruin his good mood. He leaned against the lift wall and considered how he should react when Anna told him the good news.

The lift slowed to a halt and opened.

Beverly Crusher drew a halting breath as if she smelt something foul, and narrowed her deep green eyes at him. She was no nervous Ensign Blake, and Lore knew almost instinctually that this woman was not afraid of him. In a repeat of their last very brief meeting, Lore shifted his eyes in several directions to avoid her, and felt the sudden desire to sink into a hole somewhere. The pleasant daydreams about Anna faded, and were replaced by the more accurate memory of him standing in a cargo bay with a phaser fixed on the young Wesley Crusher.

He pressed his back against the wall as if he would pass through it. Crusher stepped onto the lift without a moment’s hesitation and kept her eyes fixed on him. “Deck twelve.” Her voice was as flat and still as the gaze the kept on him.

Lore’s shifting eyes fell on her several times, and each occasion warranted a new wave of unease. He hated the fact that he could not be around this woman, and hated her for it. The very idea that a human woman should cause such panic in him was utterly ridiculous. Her son had survived, had he not? He had not even injured him, and her wounds had healed without a trace. Just what the hell did she want from him!

He closed his eyes. *Come on, deck twelve*….

“Computer, halt.”

*Shit.*

Crusher folder her arms across her chest and stepped in front of him, her eyes looking evenly across their almost matched heights. He knew he was going to hear whatever she had to say, and so decided that he might as well make the best of it. He met her eyes with much more effort than he showed.

“I’m going to ask you a simple question, and whether you answer it or not, I’ll have my answer.” She said, deadpan.
Lore clenched his teeth, “Fine.”

“Do you give a damn about this ship or anyone on it?”

Knowing what he should have said only made it worse when he did not say it. His defense mechanism should have fallen into place, complete with a snide comment and sarcastic smirk, but he could not manage it. After all, he had never before been able to answer such a question in the positive.

“Yes.”

Crusher started, not having expected that, and narrowed her eyes to the point of ominous slits.

“Hall?”

*Careful, human! “Yes.”*

Her face hardened and she took a step toward him in an impressive show of fearlessness. “She trusts you. I don’t. I may not be much of a threat to you, but if you think you can use Anna to hurt this ship, or if you ever hurt her, I will see to it that you find yourself out the first airlock.” She stepped back, “And no Pakled freighter will find you this time.”

*Too far, Doctor! “You don’t know anything.”*

The lift stopped and the door opened, but Crusher hesitated. She looked at him once more, as if she were giving one last chance to a piece of art she really did not like. She shook her head, decided. “You don’t care about anyone but yourself, and you never have.”

He remained in the lift, frozen, as she spun around and disappeared in a blur of artificially blond hair. The lift started again and he felt a sinking feeling that had very little to do with the lift’s descent. It made no sense, none whatsoever! He knew how they felt about him, he had always known, so why did it feel like a sudden blow that he could not take? He pressed his back against the bulked again and put his palms over his eyes.

The lift opened. “Hey. Oh! Is something wrong?”

Lore pulled his hands down in an instant and looked past the boyish Ensign Blake. The young man looked at him with a strange mixture of curiosity and trepidation.

“No.” He retorted as he pushed past and walked directly to the still open grate on the engineering floor. He did not look at anyone as he continued his work exactly from the point he had left it, and paid no heed to the questioning looks. After some time, the curiosity died down, and the crew became once again immersed in their individual occupations. But he was hardly immersed. Crusher’s words only echoed in his head, pressing him down. He seemed to leap between extremes as he went from unbelievable melancholy to outright hatred.

*Ignorant human! She doesn’t know anything!* He slammed the lid of the tool chest shut, cracking the front until it caved in under the lid. “Damnit!”

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

He gasped and looked up at Anna. She leaned over him with loose, freshly brushed hair and a concerned smile. He was struck dumb at the sensation of relief that washed over him, as if Anna’s mere presence had sent a wash of warm water over Crusher’s icy words. Finally he breathed and tried not to smile too happily. “Nothing. How did it go?”
She knelt down next to him. “Fine. I passed.”

He waited, but knew she would not volunteer more. “Did he say anything to you?”

“Eh, yes. You were right. He thought it was very resourceful.”

He nodded. Whether from embarrassment or concern for his feelings, he knew she would say nothing more. The concern made him feel better.

“I ran into Doctor Crusher.” He admitted.

“Oh?” Anna looked up with some concern and frowned. “Did, eh…did she say anything to you?”

He looked away. “No. Nothing.”
Chapter 21

“I can’t do this.”

“This shouldn’t be happening!” Larson grumbled as he leaned over the console, his shoulders hunched. “The coolant mix is at optimum! Why is it acting like this?”

Lore glanced at Larson and LaForge from across the engineering bay.

They had been at it for nearly two hours with very little progress. The Enterprise was still at an all stop, and had been for nearly three hours since the warp core had mysteriously lost the ability to form a stable field. Even Lore was at a loss, although he had not given the problem much attention. After all, Starfleet’s technical problems were none of his concern, and he was in no hurry to get anywhere.

“It’s an inconvenience at this point,” Said Anna as she looked wearily over the screen, her hands braced on the table, “What we should really be concerned about is a coolant leak.”

Lore sighed. He and Anna had returned to main engineering only to acquire a few sensor replacements for the port inertial dampeners—another system with inexplicable problems—but as he watched her now grow more immersed in the engine problems, he doubted she would be returning with him.

“I don’t think there’s much threat of that.” Larson shook his head, “The density isn’t staying consistent, but the pressure looks fine.”

Lore rolled his eyes. Apparently Starfleet wasn’t big on teaching basic physics.

“Looks fine.” Anna said with an averted smile.

“Yep.” LaForge nodded quickly, “If the density keeps changing, then the pressure can’t be stable.”

“Or the density isn’t changing.” Anna added.

“Yeah.” LaForge sighed and stepped back from the monitor. “It’s one or the other, because it can’t be both. We could just be looking at an instrument failure. The main computer could have shut down engines because it thinks the plasma mixture is abnormal.”

Lore’s eyes darted up. It was something LaForge had said, something that reminded him of a particularly bad past deed.

“You don’t sound convinced.” Said Anna.

“I’m not.” He replied, “Although an instrument failure would explain the emergency stop.”

Anna shook her head. “Maybe, but those readings are so specific. It’s not what you would expect from a sensor malfunction.”

“Hey, eh…I don’t mean to sound paranoid here, but….” Larson grimaced and looked around,
“Didn’t that survivor from the science station say that the station systems just started acting up for no explainable reason? Doesn’t this sound similar?”

LaForge rubbed his face. He needed solutions, not gossip. “That survivor was the guy who did it, Larson. I don’t think we should be taking his account.”

Lore stood up from his place near the warp core and turned around. Now he was certain he recognized this. He had no doubt, and the possibility froze him. But it was not impossible! There was no way it could be!

“Well, life support on deck three just…corrected itself.” Larson said in clear frustration. “We’ve run six separate tests and can’t find any reason why it failed at all, and the dampeners…..” He looked to Anna to lend him a hand.

She nodded reluctantly. “Lore and I have been working on them all morning. They’re fine now.”

“What!” LaForge burst, frustration written down his face, “Tell me it was something you did. Ensign Gomez was thrown half-way across the room.”

“I can’t explain it. Those dampeners are in perfect shape. Lore and I were about to replace the sensors just in case.” She shrugged.

Lore stepped far around the table and tried to get her attention without speaking, but she was too engrossed. He stepped down off the platform and was about to call her over when LaForge interrupted.

“I’m running out of ideas. Lore, you’ve been down there all day. Anything?”

Lore halted and frowned. In nearly three months of engineering tasks LaForge had never asked for his opinion on anything. It was no easier to deal with now that he actually did have an opinion and something to add. Of course, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to tell them.

*Damnit.* “The dampeners are fine now.” He said simply. He started to say something more, but thought better of it and looked away. “I don’t know why.”

Anna gave him a curious look, her eyes reading. Lore sighed and let it out, “The system problems look a lot like the system bugs the Borg used to disarm outposts and ships before boarding them. It made a defense far less likely.”

LaForge wrinkled his brow, “The Borg never did anything like this. Their attacks were always direct.”

“Commander.” Anna said softly.

“Wrong Borg, LaForge.” Lore snapped, seething. “Certain algorithms can be designed to give computer systems millions of authorized commands after isolating individual systems. Since each command is allowed, the computer issues no objections to enacting all of them simultaneously. The result is sudden, inexplicable fluctuations in systems.” He kept his face blank, “I called it a logic bomb.”

LaForge hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to take the sudden and rather perplexing piece of information. Unfortunately, Lore had already proven too many times in the past that he was not a helpful person, and there was no reason to think otherwise now.
“Well, as soon as we run into some rogue Borg, I’ll be sure to search for those logic bombs. Until then, we have a lot of work to do. Hall, go ahead and replace the sensors on the port dampeners.”

Anna nodded right away, but it was clear she was not pleased. She walked around the table and passed Lore on her way to the storage lockers. “Do you believe that?” She whispered once he had joined her, “Do you think the Enterprise has become infected with some kind of computer bug?”

Lore shook his head, “I have no idea. I just know that it does look very similar to the system problems we caused on Ohniaka Three. It’s why their shields weren’t up when….” He trailed off. Had he really said that? Had he been about to explain to her how he had caused the brutal murders of over two hundred people? He pulled the sensors from the storage locker and slammed it shut.

“Lore.” She said, “Hey. Hey.”

He finally looked at her with distant eyes.

“I’m sorry. I know you don’t like to talk about…certain things.” She shook her head and smiled after a deep breath. He knew the action. It meant she was about the change the subject for the better. “Would you like to do a favor for me?”

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. “Sure.”

“Have dinner with me.”

“Again?” He rolled his eyes in mock irritation, “What are you trying to accomplish with all this food? You’re not going to ‘fatten me up’, Gretel.”

“Hmm…too bad. Besides, it was the witch who was trying to ‘fatten up’ Gretel.”

“I know. I just didn’t want to call you a witch.” He smiled and carried all the sensors as they walked slowly toward the door. “In your quarters, then?”

“The holodeck.” She replied, mischievously.

“No.” He said, stopping, “Not that restaurant again.”

“Why?” She said innocently, but she was fooling no one.

“You know why.” He said, grumbling at her little game. They had been to her holodeck program twice before, and the little town of Wallace Idaho had been interesting enough accept for one primary problem. The town had one restaurant, and that restaurant had a waitress that Lore would rather avoid. “That woman keeps talking to me.”

Anna rolled her eyes, delighted, “That woman is a hologram.”

“She touched me!” He objected, rather louder than he should have. Larson and Blake looked up.

Anna laughed despite herself, “Are you sure you don’t want to go to the holodeck?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” She sighed. They stopped at the control table to change tool boxes from the locker beneath, and as she ducked down to open it she looked up at him again, “Lore, have you never dealt with someone like….Well, someone like the woman in the holodeck?”
“Someone that irritating? No.”

“No.” She shook her head and bit at the inside of her lower lip awkwardly, “I mean someone attracted to you.”

He paused for a moment. He wasn’t particularly thrown, for Anna’s curious nature led her to ask him personal questions all the time, this question made him strangely uncomfortable.

“No.”

“Oh.” She exchanged the cases and closed the locker without looking up, but continued to worry her lower lip in a strange way. Lore considered that perhaps she did not like his response. Had she been hoping that he would say he did know, that in this regard he was just as human as she? He wished he could, oddly enough, but it would be a lie. Instead, he considered her particular position. Someone as beautiful and pursued as Anna might not be able to imagine that others did not have similar experiences. Perhaps she was simply too modest to understand her own unique position.

“Just because you have made fending off advances into an art, doesn’t mean I have.” He said with a playful shrug, “After all, I don’t have your problems.”

“Problems?” She said as she stood with the case, “What problems do I have?”

He smiled at the sudden rush of excitement he felt. It happened every time he was about to give her a compliment. “You’re very beautiful, and I’m not particularly attractive. Hence, you have the problem.” There was no play acting or false modesty in his voice, for he believed precisely what he was saying. Lore was vain and always had been, but his vanity had little to do with physical appearances. After all, being an android of his advanced abilities made physical appearance rather a mute point.

She looked up and let a broad smile brighten her face. “I absolutely disagree.”

He balked, “Spare me the modesty, Lieutenant. You can’t deny it.”

She looked away with the same smile in place, and he was sure he saw the tips of her ears grow pink. “I don’t disagree with what you said about me.”

He raised a skeptical eyebrow at her.

“Is that so difficult to believe?” She said, watching him.

He forced a careless shrug and looked down, “Careful, Anna. I’m already vain enough. If you make it much worse, I will be impossible to tolerate.”

She rolled her eyes, “Whatever you say—”

“Get away from it! It’s gonna blow!”

A grinding crunch that could only be the splintering of metal pierced the mild hum of engineering. Lore darted his eyes up to the platform above just as a bracing band on the side of the core snapped like a taught string and fell to the deck with a violent crash. The churning blue-white plasma flooded from a fist size rupture at the top of the core, filling the room like water into a ship.

“Get out! Everybody out!” LaForge yelled, but the emergency alarm had already drowned him. There was no time to think about what had happened or how such an unlikely accident could have
occurred. The plasma was beginning to turn a sickening grey-green as it mixed with the oxygen in the room. The dampener sensors tumbled from his hands as he grabbed Anna by the arm and pulled her toward the door. Engineers flooded through the sesame doors from all directions, desperate to save their lives from the flood of death behind.

“It’s closing! Hurry!” LaForge rushed backward to the closing sesame doors as other rushed past. “Kendrick!”

Anna halted outside the door, forcing Lore to stop lest he pick her up and drag her further, an act he was very nearly considering. The sesame door drew down too quickly, and Lore saw through the mist a pair of stretching arms that banging into the door as it slammed shut.

“No! No! Damn it!” LaForge pounded fists against the doors in a quick fit of rage. Lore looked down at Anna with heavy relief, so glad that she could not hear the agonizing cries from the other side of the door. It lasted but a few seconds, followed by the dull thud of a body hitting the carpeted floor.

“Agh!” LaForge darted back from the door and drew a few quick breaths. “Larson! Go to auxiliary control and start the ventilation! Hall! You’re with me on the bridge. What the hell happened?”

Lore darted after them without invitation and immediately drew close to Anna’s side in the turbo lift. He knew what was happening now. He was sure of it. It was just...impossible! He leaned toward Anna, “The bracing structure didn’t break. It was released.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” LaForge demanded as he braced himself against the wall of the shuttering lift. Two other officers were also looking at Lore as if his face had turned green.

“I wasn’t talking to you!” He snapped in reply.

“Lore! Please!” Anna groaned, “What do you mean ‘released’?”

He took a step back and thought about every detail he had noted in the milliseconds before and after the rupture. When he had looked up the expanse of the warp core, he had seen the green indicator light on the bracing locks flash before they released, allowing the pressure to puncture the core shell. “The brace did not fail. I saw the lock disengage before the rupture.”

“No. That’s impossible!” LaForge insisted, eyes wide, “The clamps can’t disengage when the core is active. Every fail safe prevents it!”

Lore stepped toward him with an ominous glare. “So, either I’m mistaken or I’m a liar. And since you know I’m not mistaken….”

“Agh! Get out of my way!” LaForge snapped. He pushed past and moved through the door just as it opened. He moved instantly to the engineering station at the side of the bridge.

Crewman moved quickly from station to station while some worked frantically in place. Lore pressed himself against the bulked next to the lift door and tried to be unnoticeable. If what he thought was happening truly was, than there would be no escaping the destruction in time, and he was determined that he would protect Anna no matter what the cost.

“Report!” Picard shouted as he pulled himself back up into his seat.

“The coolant tanks have ruptured and the plasma coils are venting radiation into deck sixteen.” Data reported from his station at ops. Lore glanced in his brother’s direction, for even Data’s voice
was tinged with worry. “Captain?” Data’s eyes widened over his screen.

“What is it?” Picard stood now.

“Sir, the plasma venting system has opened into the dilithium chamber. A warp core breach is eminent.” The utter disbelief in his voice would have convinced the staunchest optimist, and for a few seconds there was nothing but the sound of the ship’s rumbles.

“That…That doesn’t make any sense!” Anna shouted, breaking the silence, “The venting system is one way. It would take purposeful reprogramming to reverse it.” She gasped and turned to face Lore. “The braces released.”

He nodded. What could he tell them? How could he possibly explain what was going on when he himself could not adequately explain how such a thing could happen? He had no doubt now that the Enterprise had been infected—no, targeted—with the same catastrophic logic bomb that he had taught the rogue Borg so well. He also had no doubt that there was no correction. The system would play itself out until all the commands had been issued. There could be dozens, or thousands.

“Lieutenant?” Picard stepped to the back platform, “What are you saying?”

“The bracing locks on the warp core were released. They didn’t break.” Anna drew a deep breath, “I think we’ve been sabotaged, Captain.”

Perhaps it was an innocent flinch, or perhaps the distrust LaForge had formed of Lore long ago was so engrained that he could not help himself, but in any case he turned his narrowed eyes on Lore in a silent accusation.

“Don’t you dare look at me!” Lore burst angrily, pushing himself away from the wall. “I’m on this ship! Do you think I’m suicidal!”

“Enough of this! You, get off my bridge!” Picard demanded as he turned his back on Lore and faced LaForge. “Geordie, can you do anything?”

It was LaForge’s business to have the answers. That was the person he had always been, and it was nearly incomprehensible to him now that he had nothing. There was no solution. There was simply no time. “I’m sorry, Captain.”

“The Bajoran!” Lore shouted suddenly. A strange, bitter-sweet laugh escaped him as he shook his head. An epiphany was something to an android just as it was something to a human. How could he have missed it? It was the only possible explanation. He looked at them, the entire bridge of crewman starring at him as if he had gone mad, “That woman, the Bajoran. She was the only non-crewman who’s been onboard since Reed left. It must have been her.”

Data rose from his seat now and stepped past Picard. He analyzed Lore in the most curious manner. “Lore, I do not know to what Bajoran woman you are referring. There have been no visitors aboard.”

“Agh! The Bajoran civilian from the station. I saw her in—” He closed his eyes and his expression fell. “You never found her. Security never found an intruder and escorted her off the ship?”

Picard merely shook his head, for his face had grown dark with either suspicion or frustration. Lore suspected both. He closed his eyes again. He had assumed that the woman had simply entered the ship by mistake or out of curiosity, and he had certainly assumed that security would merely pick her up and escort her back to the station. But they had never known she was even on board.
He had known. He had seen her and he had done nothing because it wasn’t his job, because the
Enterprise was not his home to protect, because he told himself that the petty affairs of the ship
were nothing to him!

This is my fault.

“Bajoran woman.” Riker seethed now from his place behind tactical. “Buel Kala.”

“We’ll assume so, when we have the time. Data, if we can’t stop this, whatever it is, maybe we
can take its weapon. Can you eject the core?”

Data darted back to his console and pressed a few controls in a flash. The computer replied with
a negative wail. “No, Sir. The ejection system is not responding. Sir, I may be able to utilize the
manual ejection—”

“No, Commander. Not even you would survive down there.” Picard turned and gave Riker the
silent nod.

Riker nodded back, “All hands, abandon ship! Repeat, abandon ship! This is not a drill!”

Lore lurched forward to take Anna’s arm, and as he did he watched Data’s frame appear to sink
in on itself for a moment. Data stared blankly at the console for a few seconds, but it was an
eternity to an android. In that eternity, Lore looked up at the asteroid field surrounded them, the
minor stellar curiosity that they had come to study hours ago, and he knew what Data must have
already figured out. They weren’t going to survive. The blast would shoot the asteroids out like
millions of bullets, only to grab them again with its gravity and suck them back like a whirlpool of
rock.

Lore looked up and watched the men and woman stuffing themselves into the lifts with the
utmost professionalism. They were so organized, so prepared, and yet it would do nothing for
them. The asteroid field was not static, and to clear it in time would take course corrections so fast
that it would be beyond the capabilities of any pilot. It would be past the capabilities of the pod
computers.

But not past me. Lore grabbed Anna’s arm and pulled her away from the station with more
force than he wished, but they had to move fast and she had to survive. She had to! “Let’s go,
Anna. Now.”

“Wait. I think I might be able to force the venting system off line. It might buy us some time.”
Anna said as she still pressed the controls.

“Come on! Let’s move!” Riker shouted from the lift door. Anna took off toward the lift, but
Lore stayed to grab Data’s arm as he passed.

“You know, don’t you?” He whispered. There was no time to note that they were the first
words he had said to his brother in months.

Data pulled his arm away harshly, and for a moment there was such agony on his face that Lore
gasped. “Yes. I know!” He closed his eyes and spoke, “You will get as many crewman in your
escape pod as you can, and you will navigate out of this asteroid field. As many as you can, Lore.
Force them if you must.”

With that, Data pulled away from Lore and pressed into the lift in front of Riker and Anna. Lore
followed and forced himself next to Anna as the lift descended. Life threatening situations were
not new to him, but the urge to protect someone else was. Without thinking he reached to his side
and took Anna’s hand in his, lacing his fingers through hers. She could not die. She was the only friend he had ever had.

She turned her face around to look at him and whispered, “Lore, what is it?”

He knew he could not tell her. That kind heart of hers would choose someone else to take her place, and if he forced her to go with him the guilt and anger would be like a weight on her.

_No, no!_ He shook his head and tried to ignore the thoughts rushing through his mind and the sickening guilt pressing behind his eyes. Troi, Blake, Varek, and the other hundreds of people who had tolerated him for months were about to disappear. The black, empty quarters that were his prison and now his home were about to be reduced to marble size chunks. Troi, who had trusted him enough to allow him to wake up from his own nightmare, might be among the dead, and Crusher, who hated him more than any would be right.

‘You don’t care about anyone but yourself, and you never have.’

“I can’t do this.” He whispered, and the words were for his own sake, his new self speaking to the old.

“What?” Anna said back and cupped her other hand over his.

He knew that everyone was looking at him, but there was no time for subtlety. Once he had made his decision, he was almost relieved, but time was still pressing. “Anna,” he said suddenly, dropping her hand. “Get into the escape pod with Data.”

“Lore, what are you talking about?”

He shoved past suddenly, pushing Riker from the door and slamming his hand against the emergency stop. The lift slowed dramatically, forcing everyone to hold the walls.

“Lore! What hell are you doing!” Picard shouted, but Lore had already forced the door and stepped out. He held it long enough to face Anna for what he was sure would be the last time.

“Get into Data’s escape pod, Anna. Do you understand?” He let the doors close on her horrified face, for there was no more time to assure her. He could only hope that she understood and followed his instructions, for if he failed it would be her only hope.

He turned and sprinted through the dimmed corridors. The computer was issuing no countdown, and even if it were, it was doubtful it would be accurate. He had no idea how much time he had, and so speed was of the essence. He knew precisely what he was doing, and yet there was a part of him that was writhing in confusion. That tiny part was like a little voice in his head, it yelled at him, screamed, and it sounded so much like the cold sneer he had once been so fond of.

“You’re going to die down there, you know.” The little voice scoffed, “The radiation is too much, even for you.”

_I know._ Lore turned a few corners and darted through the hatch to the junction room. The ladder well descended for five decks uninterrupted. He crossed his arms over his chest before making the plunge.

“How can you do this for people who hate you?” the voice growled, scratching at his resolve like claws. “They don’t deserve your charity.”

Anna doesn’t hate me. I can’t let her die. He landed on the metal grating with a sharp clang and
dropped to his knees. It was about fifty yards to the engineering junction room, and he would have to crawl the rest of the way.

“Yes! Yes!” the voice shouted in agreement, “Anna is your friend! Save her. There’s still time.”

I can’t. It’s not good enough.

“Prove Crusher wrong! You care about Anna. Prove it! Save her!”

He reached the intersection of tubes and turned left. It would only prove her right.

“What are they to you? Nothing! They left you in space like a piece of debris!”

It doesn’t matter.

“Save her! Take her and go in to the shuttle! To Hell with the others!”

Lore stopped in front of the sealed hatched. No. She would hate me. He stared at the cold grey metal. There was still time. If he doubled back to the pods now, he could still guarantee Anna’s safety. He didn’t have to do this.

The little voice seized the opportunity, “Yes! Go back for her! You don’t need the others.”

He cringed angrily and pounded the grating with his fists. She would never forgive me!

“You’re about to die! What’s more important? Your life or her friendship?”

Lore reached out and placed his hands on the hatch lock. A slow smile formed his lips and the peace he felt was almost overwhelming. “Her friendship.” He whispered with a strange laugh, “That’s more important.”

“You’re a fool, Lore.”

Yeah, I know…. He closed his eyes, and opened the hatch.

“Agh!” He tumbled into the junction room in a clumsy heap, falling into the murky green mist of warp plasma. It was not pain in the traditional sense that caused him to gasp and scrambled. No, Dr. Soong had been idealistic enough to spare him that. As the full and sudden exposure to the radiation hit him, every reflex and internal sensor he possessed screamed, begging for him to go back. He tried to regain his footing, but was aware of the strange sense that he did not know where the floor was, as if gravity were pulling from all directions. The junction room doors opened as he stumbled forward and fell onto the deck before a dimmed, sputtering warp core.

“You see what you’ve done?” The little voice laughed, “You can hardly walk! In a few minutes, you won’t be able to see!”

Lore scrambled forward, undeterred by the motor function systems that the radiation had already damaged. His thoughts, so sure and precise on the other side of the hatch, were flying at him in a disjointed array of old memories and distant thoughts. He saw the landscape of Omicron Theta, the tan uniform the Pakled had given him, and he heard the last words Julianna Soong had said before deactivating him.

No! No, focus! He gained his feet only to fall to his knees again next to the warp core railing, but he was close enough. He pulled up the carpeted floor panel and tossed it aside. His fingers fumbled around the round mag-lock below as he tried to pull it up. But it did not move. The lock
was coded.

“No!” He groaned in agony. He had known the mag-locks were coded. Of course they were! Had he known that? He could not have forgotten. The disorientation was even more severe for one who had never known the feeling. A new wave of disjointed memories came at him, thrusting the engineering bay away. He could sense that the radiation bombardment was destroying his neural pathways one at a time.

“The code. Anna’s code!” he muttered, but he could not hear his own words. He could not hear anything anymore. “No! No, please!” He slammed his fists on the grating, crushing them on either side. He had seen Anna use her personal access code dozens of times, but he just…couldn’t…remember!

“One, six…Alpha, seven. No, no. Alpha, one…seven, three.” He shook his head as if somehow the motion would help him, but it did not. His left arm collapsed suddenly, and he fell to his side next to the open panel. Strange sparks blinked in his vision.

“Strawberries?” He muttered, distant, “don’t like…strawberries.” What’s a strawberry?

The world was silent, and even the voices and images in his head were growing fewer. He could see more of the memories now, for they stayed longer. He remembered looking up, unable to move, at the sad face of Julianna Soong, his mother. She was saying something, but he could not hear. He knew the memory, knew well what she had said, and yet it was lost to him now. The image faded away, and now he was standing next to Anna as she leaned over him and ran her fingers over a console. He had been so amazed that she would leave him with access to the computer. How could she be so trusting—?

“Alpha, seven, six, one!” His eyes shot up, blind, and he dragged his half dead arm until it fell into the open panel. “Alpha, seven, six, one.” He hardly knew what he was saying or doing, but it felt so important! His fingers blindly ran over the small control pad below, pressing the controls. Finally, he felt the metal of the mag-lock under his hand.

“You idiot.” The little voice whispered, shaking him through the silence, “You could have saved yourself.”

Shut up! He pulled up on the mag-lock, and the world disappeared. He no longer felt the metal under his hand or smelled the noxious fume of the plasma. He heard no alarms and saw no emergency lights. I’m sorry. I tried…tried. I—

Lore’s hand dropped into the open floor and his gold eyes stared up, seeing nothing.
“This is not heaven.”

The sun shown down through the leaves as they fluttered in a light breeze. It was a cool, mild wind, and the sun was soft behind a curtain of white clouds that moved fast across the sky. He continued to stare up for some time, but how long was unknowable. The sensation of no time was frightening, and he wondered just how badly he had been damaged.

Where am I?

Finally, he dragged his arm across the soft bed of grass and placed it under himself. He was remarkably relieved to see that he had regained his motor controls and attempted to do a quick self diagnostic on his basic systems, but was unable to access the command. In fact, he was unable to even view the access platform to his mainframe. It was just…gone.

He rolled onto his knees and took his feet without any issue. A plush patch of grass crunched beneath his feet and he took a moment to look all around him. He knew this place. His perfect memory did not appear to be hindered by his inability to directly access files, and he stared in abject confusion at the rolling hills and boulders of Omicron Theta. But it could not be. The grass was alive and green beneath his feet. The trees were brown and sappy and waved in the wind only as moist, living things can. Omicron Theta was a wasteland. He had seen to it when he had helped the Crystalline entity suck the life from the planet. So, how could this be?

“Hello?” He called, but the gentle rustle of the trees above swallowed his words and kept them close. The trees were thick here, making a shadowy canopy that wavered as beams of sunshine made it through and danced on the ground. He was on a small hill just above a slate paved path. He knew that path. It led from the main colony to the emergency bunker buried deep in the rocky cliff-side. It had been built for storms and possible Romulan attacks, and had proven worthless in defending the colonists from the aim of the Crystalline entity.

In a few long strides he jumped down onto the path and looked both ways. He knew the colony was no longer there. He also knew that the bunker was empty. Then again, he had known that his former home was a life-less wasteland, a fact that appeared to be untrue at the moment. How many of his other preconceptions were now untrue? Lore gritted his teeth suddenly and frowned. How could they leave him here? Clearly that was what had happened. How else was he to explain how he had gone from the Enterprise engineering bay to Omicron Theta? Perhaps there had been some terra-forming on Omicron Theta to renew its’ tarnished face. Yes, that was a possible explanation—

“I remember you.” Came a coy, giggling voice.

Lore spun around and found himself less than two meters from a young human girl. She could be no older than six years, and had a head of long brown curls. He was certain she had not been there a moment ago. She could not have been!

“Is this Omicron Theta?” He said at once. He was sure it was, but he needed confirmation. Hell, he just needed an explanation! How had he gotten there? Why would Data and the other’s abandon
The little girl held her hand in front of her and seemed to dance in place the way shy children do. “I’m looking for the cat.” She said under pinked cheeks. “Did you see him?”

“No.” He clipped, for Lore had never had dealings with children. “Is this Omicron Theta? Are there other people here?”

She lifted a little hand to her lips and chewing nervously at her fingernails. “You don’t remember me. They said you would remember me.”

“What are you talking about?” Clearly this infant was not going to be of any assistance. But where there were children, there were adults, and where there were adults there might be a subspace transmitter. He looked down at her and tried to put on a comforting expression. “Take me to your parents.”

As if not hearing him, she darted her eyes to the left and hopped with glee. “Oh, Spot! There you are!”

An orange domestic cat bounded down the hillside like a gymnast and stopped at the little girl’s feet. The cat rubbed his face lovingly against her legs until she bent down and pulled him up into arms with a great deal of effort. “There’s a pretty kitty. Don’t run away again!”

Lore took a few steps back and felt the irrational fear that pure confusion brings. Nothing here made sense. Nothing! “That is Data’s cat. Why do you have Data’s cat?”

She looked up at him with a very upset expression and continued to caress Spot. “You really don’t remember me. It’s not fair! They said you would remember me. They said you don’t forget things!”

“Child, I do not know you! I rem—” He stopped suddenly and knelt down in front on her as if falling. She had deep brown eyes and the tiniest freckle on the left side of her nose. A far off memory recalled a similar child once having collided with him in a hallway. The child had fallen and cried when he had not helped her up. But that had been forty years ago! That child would be an adult.

*No. That child is dead.*

“Kathryn Moss.” He whispered, falling back on his haunches on the cold stone path. “No.”

“Oh!” She laughed and hopped with Spot awkwardly in her arms. “You remember me! Wait until I tell everyone!”

“No, no!” He shouted suddenly and leapt to his feet. He jumped back several steps and held his hands in front of him. “What kind of joke is this? You think this is funny?”

“What’s wrong?” She whimpered and hugged Spot close to her face.

It couldn’t be a hologram. There was no holographic technology that could truly deceive his visual sensors. But, if not that, what? He felt as if the world were crushing down around him. “You! You’re dead! You can’t be here! Why do you have Data’s cat!”

“He’s my cat now!” She stomped in a tantrum. “Mine! You….You’re mean! You’re mean, just like you were before!” She turned and started down the path with little heels clicking on the stone.
“Wait! Come back!” Lore called after her. Real or not, he wanted some answers. The little girl disappeared around the corner up ahead, and when he cleared the tree line, he saw her brown hair vanish around the next corner. It was impossible. A human adult could not outrun him. How had she gotten so far? “Come back! Please!” He cleared the next tree line and knew what he would find around the bend. The path ended suddenly at a jagged rock face. The entrance was imperceptible to a stranger’s eye, just as the colonists had intended, but he remembered how to get in.

_She must have gone inside._ He ran his hands over the rock face and let his fingers sink into a jagged, dirty crevice. The rock face trembled slightly as a piece of rough rock slid aside and created an opening just big enough for an adult to squeeze through. He knew where he was going and felt an abject horror at returning to his home. But it was not just his home. It was the scene of his most heinous crime.

“Child, come back!” He sighed, “Kathryn! You have to answer my questions. I— I promise I’ll be nice!” He dropped his hands in futility and stood motionless in the round hallway. The place had not changed. The walls were a warm hue of gold and white, and the steel grate floors clanked under foot as he moved. He listened intently, but heard no sound of little feet on the metal floor. There was no point in following shadows, and so he turned in the direction he knew he must go. The colonists had kept a subspace transmitter in the massive bunker, but as he turned he cried out and leapt back against the wall. Standing next to the hidden entrance, with his hands held neatly behind him, was Noonien Soong.

“You always did have a way with children.” Dr. Soong said with a shake of his head, “You remember when the Gibson boy asked you where people come from? His parents weren’t pleased when you told him.”

Lore slid further down the wall and felt as if he could not breath, a sensation that was more troubling because he had never felt the need to before. “I—I didn’t know they weren’t supposed to know.” His voice was a kind of dead echo, as if he was speaking but could not control the words. “You’re dead. This isn’t real.”

Dr. Soong laughed and shook his head again. “Mmm…you never had any tact either. It made you very unpopular, you know.”

“Stop it!” Lore turned and pressed his face against the wall. _He’s not real. Not real. Dr. Soong is dead. I killed him._

“You’re not still upset about that, are you boy?” Dr. Soong balked and waved a hand at him, “I was dying anyway. Better to go quickly, if you ask me.”

Lore stared at him with panic-stricken eyes. “You’re dead?”

Dr. Soong found that truly amusing and laughed as he took a few steps forward. He laid a hand on Lore’s shoulder without any fear and patted him. “You would know, boy. After all, you’re the one who threw me across a room. Come on. I was in the middle of something when little Kathy came plowing through. You really should apologize to that kid.” Dr. Soong took a few steps down the hallway and waved his hand to encourage Lore to follow.

As if he had no control, Lore followed in a dazed state. He remained several feet behind his father, who walked without the slightest limp or infirmity. He had been over a hundred when he had died, and yet he appeared as Lore had known him before; a robust man with silver hair and a half dozen decades of life under him. They came to a round door and stopped before it. Dr. Soong held his hand over the panel.
“Now, boy, try to be on good behavior.” Dr. Soong chuckled as if he found the stereotypical parenting amusing. “Just because people die doesn’t mean they suddenly forgive everything.”

*What?*

Dr. Soong opened the door and immediately crossed to a tall work table scattered with tools and diagrams. Lore stood in the doorway as if afraid to enter, for the absolute absurdity he witnessed would frighten any sane person. It was the same laboratory in which he had been created, in which he had been trained and coddled, and also in which he had come to hate the colonists, yet it was remarkably changed. At the center of the room stood a standard green top poker table covered with chips and cards. Will Riker held a deck in his hand and was laying the cards out with expert precision.

“So, the game is five card stud, and aces are wild.”

“Don’t think I’m going to fall for that bluff again, Commander. I think I’ve finally got you figured.” Geordie LaForge said as he pulled his cards close and spread them in his fingers.

Riker laughed, “Really? And how is that?”

“Don’t tell him, Geordie.” Said Crusher in a quick scold, “If he knows what his tell is, he’ll change it.”

Riker looked truly alarmed now. “I have a tell?”

“Oh, yeah.” Geordie nodded, and was clearly pleased with himself as he leaned back in his seat. “There’s nothing you can do about it though. You aren’t the one doing it.”

Lore still could not move, and let only his eyes dart from the table to his father, and back again. Dr. Soong was long dead. Kathryn Moss was long dead. Did Riker and the others find nothing odd about this? Could they not see them?

“If this is some poor attempt to psyche me out, Geordie, you’re wasting your time. I’ve been playing this game too long.” Riker finished dealing the last cards and set the remainder of the deck neatly in the center.

Geordie laughed, “Like I said, Commander, you aren’t the one doing it. He leaned forward as if to whisper, but did not. “Whenever you’re bluffing, a certain someone at this table knows it, and her eyebrows twitch just a little.”

Riker turned to his right, “Diana!”

“I don’t know what he’s talking about.” Counselor Troi shrugged innocently. “If I’m doing it, I certainly don’t…know….” Troi lowered her cards slowly and smiled. “Look who’s finally here.”

Riker, LaForge, and Crusher looked to the door and each displayed their own particular version of irritation.

“Well, well, look what Data’s cat dragged in.” Crusher sighed and began stacking her chips with loud, angry taps.

“Ah, no, no.” Dr. Soong scolded from his place at the work bench. He pointed at young Kathryn.

Crusher rolled her eyes. “Fine. Look what Kathy’s cat dragged in.”
Lore pressed his hands against his head, “You see him! You can hear him!” He pointed vehemently at his father.

The four of them turned and looked at Dr. Soong with casual shrugs. “Of course we can see him.” Said Riker, “We’re not blind.”

“He’s dead!” Lore cried, near to hysterics. “How can you just sit there? What the hell is going on?”

“Ha! There would be fewer of us sitting here if it weren’t for you. So selfish.” Crusher returned, and rearranged her cards in her hands.

“Beverly.” Troi sighed, “What does that matter now? Let’s just move on—”

“Of course it matters.” Crusher objected, and turned angry eyes at Lore, “I’m sure it matters to the forty of fifty people who would still be alive if he had just done what he was told.”

“Hey!” Dr. Soong pointed a menacing hand at the four of them. “Now, that’s my son, and he has done some things, but I won’t stand for this. You plan to spend eternity harping on this? Mmm?”

Crusher sighed and crossed her arms over her chest like a schooled child. “No, but I just have some things to say, and then I’ll forget about it.” She turned in her chair and rested her arms across the back rest, “You should have taken the escape pod like Data told you to do! But no! You hate him so much that you wouldn’t do anything he advised. If Data told you not to jump off a cliff, you would jump!”

“How do you know what he said to me?” He stepped into the room. He was so disoriented and confused that he had nowhere else left to go. The only next step was a complete mental breakdown, and he wasn’t even sure if he was capable of such a thing. “What do you mean ‘would have’ survived?”

“Spot is my cat now!” Little Kathryn chimed from the shelf, unwilling to be left out of the conversation. “See, Mr. Data can’t take care of him anymore, so I’m going to feed him and play with him and tell him he’s a pretty cat.”

“Yes, honey,” Said Troi indulgently, “Spot is your kitty now, and you have to love him just like Data loved him. Okay?”

“Yep!” Kathryn hugged the cat lovingly to her neck and purred along with him.

Lore swallowed and stepped back from the table. Horrors upon horrors were building as impossible answers presented themselves to him. He turned toward little Kathryn and asked in a low voice, “Why can’t Data take care of Spot anymore?”

Kathryn giggled and hopped down from the shelf. “Because! Mr. Data didn’t die like them. Spot got all blown up in the ship. Didn’t you, Mr. Spot? All blown up! Boom!”

This isn’t happening.

“Yeah,” Geordie sighed and tossed his bet into the pile, “I thought it would be a little more like Risa. You know, tropical setting, beaches….But this is okay, I guess. Heaven could be worse.”

Lore fell to his knees and the room actually lost all color for a moment. “This isn’t happening.” He gasped, “I don’t believe in this.”
“Oh.” Crusher laughed, “So I guess because you don’t believe in an after-life, there isn’t one? Welcome to the universe that doesn’t revolve around you.”

“I didn’t eject the core?” He whispered in agony, “The ship was destroyed. And the escape pods—”

“—were destroyed in the blast, just like you knew they would be.” Riker completed in exasperation. He looked as if he was growing tired of the conversation, and nudge Diane to place her bet.

“No. No! I…I tried to save everyone! I tried to eject the core!” He covered his face with his hands and tried to digest what was happening.

“Oh, please!” Crusher retorted, “You were trying to save your friendship with Anna. You knew she would never forgive you for saving her life above others.” Crusher paused and shook her head, “Although I will give you that. You definitely care about Anna.”

Dr. Soong tapped his work table in a kind of applause, “I must say, boy, at least it was for a woman. That’s a way to go.”

“This…This is not heaven!” Lore shouted through his hands. He fell forward, his forehead pressed against the carpet as he collapsed in agony. “It isn’t! You’re not here! None of you are real!!”

He felt a silky softness against the back of his hands and turned his face to the side. Spot meowed close to him and rubbed his furry cheek against Lore’s arm.

“See?” Little Kathryn giggled, “Don’t be sad. Spot loves you. I bet he thinks you’re Data. When Spot is sad, you can pretend to be Data.”

Someone help me. Tell me this isn’t real.

“The last thing we want is for his memory engrams to become static in the computer coding. He would never be able to access them in the kind of…random fashion that memory allows.”

Lore looked up at LaForge from his prostrate place on the floor, “What?”

LaForge frowned over his cards, “I didn’t say anything.”

“You said something about my memory engrams. I heard you.”

Riker whistled, “I think he’s losing it. I told you he wouldn’t be able to handle this.”

“…ensure complete transference by moving all files in the same manner. It would mean all files would become active after the download.”

“Data!” Lore jumped to his feet and spun around, his eyes searching every corner of the room. He had heard him. There was no question of it! “Data, where are you!”

“Oh, boy.” Dr. Soong shook his head sadly. He came out from behind his work bench and walked toward his son with sad concern. “Don’t do this to yourself, Lore. You’ll see Data again. Even he can’t live forever.”

“There will be little way to tell if or when his senses become active. We will simply have to observe….=”
“Data! I hear you!” Lore darted back to the entrance and scanned the hallway. It was vacant, but Data’s voice had been as close as the others, as if he were standing right behind him. He turned back to the room and felt a bizarre jolt of disorientation. For a few seconds, it was as if gravity were no longer pulling him down, and he had the strange sensation that he was not standing, but laying on his back looking up. As the feeling subsided, he fell to his knees again and the room grew dark.

“What is wrong with him?” Crusher sighed. “Is he going to be like this forever?”

Troi looked down at him and smiled, “I’m sensing something from him. I think he’s conscious.”

Lore stared at her with utter confusion. Of course he was conscious. She had been speaking to him for nearly three minutes! He kept his eyes down as Dr. Soong came to his side and placed his hand on his shoulder. The old man shook his head sadly.

“I know this is hard to accept, boy, but Data will be here soon enough. I’m sure time flies faster for us than them. He’ll be here before you know it.”

“To hell with Data!” Lore shouted furiously and buried his face in his hands.

“Oh, I see.” Soong chuckled, “It’s the woman. Well, I’m sure this Anna will be along even faster than Data.

“What? No! No, I don’t want Anna to die!”

“Everyone dies, boy, you know that. You should know that better than most.”

“Leave me alone. Go!” He tried to gain his feet and flee, but gravity seemed to switch sides suddenly, and he felt himself tumbling to the ground. “This isn’t real! Why are you doing this to me?”

“No! Something’s wrong! He can’t see us!”

Anna? Anna! Lore spun around and darted his eyes in every direction. The world had gone black as pitch, but still his father stood visible beside him, illuminated by some unseen light. “I heard her. Did you hear her? She must be here somewhere!”

“Goodbye, boy. It was nice talking to you.”

“What? Where are you going? You have to help me find her. Did you hear her too?”

Dr. Soong shrugged, “I hear them all the time.” At that moment, Dr. Soong stepped aside, and Anna appeared behind him through the dark. Her bright eyes were wide with panic, and she appeared to be looking through the dark in many directions.

“What’s wrong with him? Why can’t he see us?” She said to the dark, but if there was a reply, Lore did not hear it. He rushed toward her and in all his relief and horror at seeing her, cradled her face in his hands.

“What are you doing here?” He demanded, near to tears. “I told you to go with Data! How could you do this?” He rubbed his thumbs over her cheeks and tried to understand the shock in her eyes. Perhaps she was just as confused as he had been. Perhaps she did not understand that she was dead.
“You’re not making any sense.” She said. She gripped his wrists as if to push him away from her, but she made no attempt at it. “Please, just calm down.” Anna looked sharply to the side as if hearing something, but Lore detected nothing through the dark. “He’s what?”

“Do you hear him too?” Lore asked frantically. “I thought I heard Data earlier, but I couldn’t find him. He isn’t here.”

Anna shook her head in his hands, “No, no. Lore, he’s here. We’re all here. Wake up.”

“What?”

****

“Wake up!”

It was like turning up the lights in a blackened cargo bay. All at once the world came to life around him, around Anna, and he found himself standing in the center of the Enterprise sickbay. Anna stood awkwardly before him, trapped by his gentle hold on her. Half a dozen people were scattered about the room in various poses of alarm. Riker stood near the door next to several security officers, each with his phaser held at the ready. Crusher stood much closer with her hands held defensively in front of her. Blood ran from her nose, smeared viciously over her lips.

Lore gasped and released Anna at once. He flew back toward the corner, away from them all. He could not understand what was going on. If he was onboard the Enterprise, where had he been before? And how could he return so quickly, with no knowledge of the journey? Reality itself seemed to be falling apart, and his was not a mind accustomed to unreality.

“Lore, stop. Just calm down. Everything is fine!” Troi shouted from her place across the room. She took several steps forward, her feet crunching over the floor. Lore looked down to see that half the sickbay was strewn with scattered hyposprays and bits of small components. He recognized at least a dozen micro-hydraulic servos and isolinear connection tubes. A storage cart lay on its side, the drawers and cupboards flung open and the contents scattered.

Lore pointed at Troi to demand she tell him how they had gotten back to the ship, when he saw a smear of red over the back of his hand. He held it close to his eyes and was horrified. He looked back at Crusher with her bloodied face, “I…I hit you?” He pressed his back to the bulked and stared with shock at Crusher’s red, angry face. The cartilage protrusion of her nose was beginning to turn blue in the crevices next to her eyes.

“Where am I?” He asked no one in particular, but his eyes shifted from person to person. He knew that he saw in sickbay, but moments ago he was sure he had seen his father’s lab. Who was to say what was real?

Data came away from his place next to Troi and stopped close to Lore. He blocked his view of the others, as if he wished to have his undivided attention. “Lore, you are aboard the Enterprise, in sickbay. I had almost completed the hard repairs to your matrix connectors when you reactivated suddenly.”

Crusher scoffed, but the sound was distorted by a painful intake of breath, “What he did was go crazy!”
Lore shook his head, “I don’t remember hurting you! Where was I?”

Data frowned, “You do not remember the warp core breach? You were in main engineering when we found—”

“I wasn’t in main engineering!” Lore spat. The confusion was replacing his alarm with anger. “I mean… I was, before, but after that I was on Omicron Theta. I was there!”

Data shook his head slowly and raised his hands as if to lay them on his brother’s shoulders. “You were dreaming, Lore.”

“Dreaming!” Lore cried in a rage, “What is this, some kind of joke! I was there! It was—Everything was like it was before. The planet wasn’t dead, and there were people there. You were there!” He pointed at Crusher, “And you, and you!” Riker and Troi exchanged alarmed looks. Lore knew that look. They thought he had lost his mind. He turned away from them, but met Anna’s eyes secretively. “Dr. Soong was there.”

Data’s posture stiffened and he stepped back. Lore had never spoken Dr. Soong’s name to him. “Lore, you must listen to me. Dr. Soong designed a dream program that would remain dormant until a pre-determined time. My attempts to repair your neural net forced me to activate latent programs. I did not know that you were unaware of it.”

He was a logical person. In spite of all his anger and temper and outright reactionary ways, Lore still knew that the simplest explanation tended to be right. “Dreaming? I never left the ship? I didn’t die?” He regretted the words the moment they escaped him, and clenched his jaw in humiliated consternation.

Anna came to his side suddenly, blocking the others as Data had. “You never left the ship, Lore. We found you in main engineering and brought you to sickbay. Trust me. Everything is going to be fine as soon as we finish the repair.”

Anna came to his side suddenly, blocking the others as Data had. “You never left the ship, Lore. We found you in main engineering and brought you to sickbay. Trust me. Everything is going to be fine as soon as we finish the repair.”

“Finish? Lore paused and slowly brought his hand up to the side of his head. His internal diagnostic systems did not appear to be online, and so it was only by the brush of his fingertips that he realized the entire left side of his cranial shell was missing, the internal workings naked of their human façade. He turned away from Anna, his pride bristling with embarrassment.

“Everyone out! Now!” Troi moved to the center of the room with authority that she rarely expressed. She gave Riker a reassuring nod and motioned toward the door as the security officers reluctantly holstered their phasers. Several nurses escaped into the aft lab, but Anna remained in place. Troi came to her side and gave her a stern, knowing look, “You too, Anna. I’ll tell you as soon as Data has completed the repairs.”

Lore groaned to himself. Troi had sensed his crippling embarrassment and was trying to rid him of the audience. He felt little better, but was awash in gratitude. The embarrassment itself was… embarrassing. After all, had he not always been proud of what he was? “No. Stay.” He reached out and took Anna’s hand suddenly. “She can stay.”

Anna nodded and gently released her hand from his. It was no easy feat, considering that Lore found it suddenly difficult to let her go. He realized that he wanted to be close to her. He wanted her to stay if just for the fact that he did not want to be without her company. It was comforting in a strange way.

Crusher disappeared into her office and Troi moved reluctantly toward the door as well. When only Anna and Data remained, he flung himself away from the wall and pulled a stool away from a
nearby desk. Sitting himself down with a rough gesture that left no question to his mood, he closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. “Let’s get this over with.”

Data immediately retrieved a tray of tools from the bio-bed and set to his task as if he had never been interrupted. His inappropriate silence, considering all that had occurred, gave no question to the turbulence of his thoughts. Lore knew that his brother had never been the particularly quiet type. Data had always been too curious for that, but he appeared determined to say nothing now.

Finally, Lore spoke in a near whisper. “How did you avert the breach?”

Data said nothing, but Anna smiled with surprise. “We didn’t. You ejected the core. Once it was free of the venting system, the thermal runaway bled off into space. It took us about two hours to retrieve it.” She lowered her eyes, “You did it.”

Relief forced a small smile to his lips. Not too long ago he had been so sure that everyone had died because of his failure. It was a remarkable feeling, but nothing like the close relief he felt when Anna smiled again and patted his arm. He would have given anything to make certain that she was unharmed, and he nearly had.

“Lore, please attempt to access your self-diagnostic systems. Are they online?” Data asked.

Lore sighed against the awkward situation and complied. “No, they’re still off-line.”

Data merely nodded and returned to his task, his fingers working close to Lore’s head with meticulous movements. Lore grumbled irritably and turned back toward Anna. His personal discomfort was so high now that he considered putting an end to it right then and there, but he knew Anna was not capable of the repairs he needed, and he could not perform them alone. He glanced up at Data several times, but if his brother noticed he gave no indication.

“Can you deactivate this dream program?” Lore muttered without looking up, “I don’t think I care for it.”

Data paused, “Unless you choose to initiate a dream sequence, it should not cause you any difficulties. Access your renewed file bank. It should be the only program present.”

Lore sighed and closed his eyes. Why did he suddenly dislike the idea of Anna hearing the computer terminology associated with his positronic brain? He did not like the renewed implication that he was different. He did not want Anna to see him as different. Accessing the file in the blink of an eye he understood perfectly the dream sequencing, the manner in which imagery was drawn from memory and creative sub-routines, and found it to be no more interesting than that. He balked at the idea. Dreams! Waste of time! Why would Dr. Soong create such a worthless thing?

“Do you see it?” Data probed.

“Yes.” Lore retorted. He turned back to Anna, “I used your access code, Anna. I’m sorry.”

“I will not be able to complete these repairs if you insist on moving.” Data objected, and forced Lore’s head back into a forward facing position.

“How much longer is this going to take?” Lore demanded, his fists clenching at his sides.

Data said nothing. He continued with his work at such an engrossed, dedicated speed that anyone would have guessed he was desperate to be done. Lore could imagine why and scoffed to himself. He had nearly lost his life saving the ship, and still Data could not manage even a thank you! Still, he preferred to be done with him as soon as possible; out of sight, out of mind! It was too
much. The entire, ridiculous situation was too much for Lore to bear and he just wanted to be away from it.

He pulled back suddenly and slapped Data’s hand away from him, sending the small tools clattering against the wall.

“Lore!” Anna gasped and jumped back from them.

“I do not want your help!” Lore sneered as he stood from the stool and stepped behind the bio-bed.

Data stood frozen in place and let his hands slowly fall to his sides. The look on his face was something between anger and disappointment, “Lore, you cannot repair the remaining matrix connections yourself—”

“What do you care! I must say, I’m surprised, Commander. Why didn’t you just dispose of me through the airlock, since I’m sure the transporter would have been too much trouble for you this time!”

Data took several slow steps back and opened his mouth to speak, but something stopped him, and he closed his eyes against his words. When he opened them again, his face was a cold mask, “You are right, Lore. Perhaps next time I will remember your advice, and not bother.” Data turned, the same disappointed anger etching his face, and left without another word.

Lore stared after him with cold rage and gripped his fingers into the thick foam of the bio-bed. He finally brought himself away from it when Anna stepped around him and moved a few steps toward the door. “Anna.” He said with a renewed smiled, as if he had finally gained to himself what he wanted all along, “I’m glad to see —”

Anna shook her head several times and would not look at him. Finally, she cupped her hands over her nose and mouth and drew a ragged, emotional breath. She turned toward the door.

“No, don’t go. Please.” He reached out and tried to take her arm, but she shook it off instantly and still refused to look at him.

“Lore, you are—.” She shook her head sadly, “Never mind.” She turned away from him and left.

*No! Please, Anna!*

He stepped forward to follow, but was stopped in his tracks when Crusher emerged from her office. She was still breathing heavily, her composure fighting against the pain of the broken nose she had yet to repair. Lore took a step back from her and could not keep his voice even, for the space at the bridge of her nose had turned a devastating purple. “I’m…I didn’t mean to hurt you. I didn’t know you were there—”

Crusher’s eyes narrowed like slits as she moved toward him, “You know what, Lore? For a moment—just a moment—I thought I was wrong about you. You are unbelievable.” She grabbed a med kit from the shelf beside her and with one last stabbing look left the sickbay.

“Agh! What do you want!” He cried, hysterical, and buried his face in his hands, but it did not stop him from seeing again the disgust on Crusher’s face. More importantly, he saw the wretched disappointment in Anna’s eyes. She had not even looked at him.

*Can I blame her?*
He backed up until he bumped into one of the bio-beds and let himself slump over it as if he were too weak to stand. He was too weak to stand, but it had nothing to do with physical strength, and as he let his face sink into the cloth covered foam, his chest seized and shook him like a rattle. *I’m sorry. I’m sorry.* He uttered the words, incomprehensible, into the muffling foam as his tears soiled the grey cloth. “I’m…sorry. I’m sorry!”

There was no one to hear.
“Would you be able to forgive Lore if he were your brother?”

“Our intelligence has picked up several references to Narok Reed, Captain. Apparently he’s a very popular supplier of stolen Federation technology. Do you remember the Marzipan?”

Picard nodded solemnly at the screen, and knew that the sober look on Admiral Janeway’s face did not bare good news. “The medical ship that disappeared in the Tarpon expanse last year.”

Janeway shook her head slowly, “Afraid not, Captain. Section nine agents turned up the Marzipan’s deflector dish on a Farian cargo vessel little less than a month ago. We have little doubt that we’ll find more soon.”

Picard shook his head. He knew he was dealing with a pirate and a thief, but he had not known that he was dealing with a serial murderer. “Reed and his people killed the crew? The Marzipan had a full complement of nearly a hundred.”

“I don’t think so. We’ve found evidence of similar scenarios across at least two dozen systems, and in most cases the crews were found alive in their escape pods. From what we can gather, Reed used these damn computer bugs to convince the crews that they have to abandon ship, and as soon as they’re gone, the plunder begins.” Janeway crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. Picard could see the San Francisco skyline behind her. “We’ve found four escape pods already in the Tarpon expanse. We’re expecting the rest soon. The escape pod engines simply couldn’t fight the gravitation eddies, and from what we can tell most of them died when their life support systems eventually failed.” She leaned forward, those statuesque eyes penetrating the screen as if she were really there. “Don’t think we’re dealing with a moral thief here, Captain. Reed gets the people off the ships to make his job easier, not to spare them. The Marzipan is proof of that.”

“As are we, Admiral.” Picard replied, “But, all indications point to the fact that our near warp core breach was not a simulation meant to force an evacuation. It was real.”

Janeway nodded, “Yes, Captain. I read your report, and I’m afraid I have to agree. Have you… considering removing Lore from your ship?”

“I have considered it, Admiral, and dismissed it.”

Janeway smiled with approval. “I can understand, Captain. I myself have some experience with questionable crew members. In any case, if this Narok Reed is looking for the Enterprise, we may be able to use that to capture him. You expressed in your report that Lore seemed to know something about Reed’s methods. Has he said anything else?”

“No.” Picard shook his head, “He has not said anything.”

Admiral Janeway was thoughtful for a few moments, then leaned toward the screen as if to whisper. “The first time Seven-of-Nine saved our hides it was a hard pill to swallow, Captain. Am I right in assuming something similar aboard the Enterprise?”

Too right. “I was able to meet Seven-of-nine a few weeks after your return from the Delta
quadrant, Admiral, and there is one significant difference her and Lore.”

Janeway smiled slightly. “What was that?”

“Her company was tolerable.”

“Ah.” Janeway laughed several times and shook her head, “Not always, Captain. Not always. Keep me apprised of any progress you may encounter, but until section nine comes up with anything substantial you’re cleared to resume your schedule.”

“Understood, Admiral. Thank you.” He closed the comm a few seconds after the screen went dark, and leaned wearily back in his chair. There was no denying the fact that Lore had indeed saved their “hides” from certain destruction. Data had informed him immediately after the return of the escape pods that no one but he and Lore would have been able to navigate the escape pods clear in time. It was a scenario he had suspected from the onset, but had kept to himself for the sake of there being no other solution, and he could not fault Data for having kept the information to himself. He would have done the same had he been in his place.

“Picard to Data. Commander, would you join me in my ready room, please?”

“On my way, Captain.”

Picard sighed and crossed to the replicator to place his usual order of tea. He had noticed a change in his second officer. It had taken hold immediately after the news of Lore’s activation, and had only gotten worse since. His demeanor was more subdued, and at times he appeared lost in thought, although Picard knew that Data was capable of giving adequate attention to hundreds of subjects at once. Still, others had noticed as well. Counselor Troi had expressed her concerns in her usually vague manner. She worried that he was becoming bitter.

The door chimed.

“Come.” Picard announced and moved back toward his seat. Data stepped into the room in his usual formal manner. He never walked directly to the desk the way Riker did, nor did he take an immediate seat on the sofa like Troi or Crusher. “Please, sit.”

Data nodded and took the chair in front of the desk, his back even more upright than usual. His expression was empty, and his eyes moved to several places around the room, the way children did when they were hoping to avoid an impending subject.

“Data, have you spoken to Lore?”

“No, Sir.” Data replied instantly, “I…do not believe he wishes to speak to me.”

Picard drew a deep breath, feeling like they had been here before. “He does not wish to speak to you, or you do not wish to speak to him?”

“Both, Captain.” Data admitted after a pause. “I do not believe we can learn much from Lore in regards to Reed’s infiltration of the ship’s main computer.”

“How so?”

“Geordie told me that Lore mentioned the Borg having used similar methods to disarm the Ohniaka Three outpost. I have studied those computer logs, and while Reed’s methods have similar results, they are much different.”
“I see.” Picard squirmed without moving. He was not a ship’s counselor and had never fancied himself to be one. But, Data was not just his second in command, he was his friend, and so he decided to continue with the subtle route. “Has Lore, to your knowledge, said anything about what happened in engineering? Has he said anything to Lt. Hall?”

Data shook his head, “No, Sir. It is my understanding that Lt. Hall is not speaking to Lore.”

Picard was surprised to see, in the most subtle fashion, a look of satisfaction on his friend’s face. It faded as quickly as it had come, but he had seen it none the less. “Data, I’m going to ask Counselor Troi to speak with Lore. If he can help us in any way with capturing Reed, we need that avenue open. I would like you to speak to Lt. Hall.”

Data looked up sharply, “To what end, Sir?”

Picard could hardly believe what he was about to suggest, but it appeared that in this case helping Lore was going to be to everyone’s benefit. The last thing their investigation needed was a melancholic android refusing to talk! “As I understand it, Lore and Lt. Hall have developed a friendship. Perhaps he would be less closed if Lt. Hall would speak to him again.”

“I cannot be certain, Captain, but I believe Lt. Hall is angry because Lore refused to accept my help. Since I do not believe that he will ever do so —”

“Data.” Picard stopped him there. It was time for some honesty, and he hated to do it. “Did you thank Lore for what he did?”

Data’s eyes widened in the kind of outrage Picard had never seen. “Captain, I—. Lore has done too many things in the past for one good act to—” Data stopped himself and looked away. He was clearly not being himself, but he had never had much experience with pride. In fact, prior to Lore, he was sure he had had no experience with it. “Captain, I do not wish to thank Lore for anything.”

Picard pinched the bridge of his nose and rested his elbow on the desk. How could he argue with such a thing? It had taken him nearly twenty years to make amends with his own brother, and Lore’s crimes far outstripped anything the Picard family had ever done. “Data, Lore is arrogant, sarcastic, but above all he is proud. Did he risk his life for ours”? I think there’s no question of it. So, if we can’t find any possible self-serving motive for him to do such a thing, we can only conclude that he did it…for us. I understand if that is a hard pill to swallow. I am not ordering you to say anything to Lore. I’m not even suggesting it as a friend because, frankly, I don’t think it’s any of my business.”

“Sir?” Data looked up, confused. If it was none of his business, than why were they discussing it now?

“You have to settle things with Lore yourself, and if our experiences with Lore are anything, you will have to go first.” Picard hated to do it, but could see little other choice. “I have no doubt that you can swallow your pride easier than Lore will. You’re bigger than most of us.”

Data sighed and let his head fall forward. It was the most pitiful display of internal struggle that Picard had ever seen from his android friend, and he did not envy him, but this conflict had gone on long enough. If something did not change soon, Picard had no doubt that it would end either in a serious conflict, or Lore would flee the ship suddenly, no doubt taking one of their shuttles in the process.

Data lifted his head finally and seemed to be composed. “Captain, may I ask you a personal question?”
“Of course.”

“Would you be able to forgive Lore if he were your brother?”

_Damn it, Data._ “Like I said, Data, you’re bigger than most of us.”
“Is revenge making you sloppy?”

I’ll see you soon, Lydi. I promise.

Reed pressed his face deeper into the pillow and cringed as the disruptor barrel dug against his forehead. The pain was comforting, as if the small example of things to come brought him one step closer to her. It did. He knew that the pain would be fleeting. Perhaps he would not feel any pain at all. Perhaps it would be done before he even felt the trigger give, and then he would finally see her again. He pressed harder, deeper, until he could feel the cold metal cutting his skin. If he had only been able to free himself from that decontamination vault, the Borg would have killed him too. He had no doubt of it. It was his own instinctual need to survive that had allowed Lydia to die alone in front of him. If only he had resisted the urge to run, he would be with her now.

The logical part of him, that stoic Vulcan that he had long ago discarded, objected. There was no after life. Lydia’s katra had dispersed upon her death. She was nowhere. He would never see her again.

“No, no!” He leaned forward until he had pressed his face so far into the pillows that he could hardly breathe. He did not want to believe that. How could something so beautiful and so unique simply vanish because her heart stopped beating? Lydia had believed it. She had once told him so, and he had objected by telling her that she could provide no proof. He regretted it now, just as he regretted many things, but none of that mattered. She could tell him he had been wrong. She could lord it over him playfully, just as she had at the academy when he had decided that having her was worth losing every Vulcan part of himself.

Reed gasped suddenly, startled by the sound of his own muffled laughter. He could see again in his mind the first time he had ever laughed in public. She had done that. They had been making their way to the change of command ceremony, and it had been just like the San Francisco weather to rain the event into misery. Along the way, Lydia had slipped to the side of the path and dislodged a cobble stone, pulling both of them down the embankment and into the freezing muck of the reflecting pool. At first he had been angry that his dress uniform was ruined and they would be late for the ceremony, but as he had realized he was angry—truly enraged!—the laughter had started. It had felt amazing. Being angry had actually felt…good. When the quick flash of frustration had passed, he had been left only with the fact that he was holding her by the waist to keep her from falling back into the water.

Oh! I miss you! He shook the laughter away, along with the good memories, and pulled himself back from the cushions. His palms had grown cold with sweat, but his grip was still firm on the disruptor. Why he had not done this eight years ago was beyond him. How much pain he could have saved himself! How easily he could have avoided the emotional atrophy that had hardened him to nothing! Only when he was alone, when he could think about her uninterrupted did he become something like his former self. But, surely she would forgive him for what he had become. Lydia would understand. She had always been so understanding.

I had to do it, Lydi. I couldn’t let him get away with it. Please understand.
In his imagination he heard her sweet, soprano voice telling him that it was alright, that she forgave him and she was waiting to see him again. Reed smiled to himself and leaned forward more. When he fell he did not want to land on the floor. As unimportant as it would be, he did not wish to be found on the floor. There was something undignified about it. He ran his finger smoothly over the trigger and drew a last, deep breath.

“Reed! We need to talk!”

He dropped his hands and turned furious eyes across the room. “Get away from that door! Leave me alone!” What miserable company he had brought on himself. He could not even die in peace!

The chime rang several times and angry bangs sounded through the metal door. “What the hell have you done, Reed! This is not the arrangement we had! What did you do to that ship!”

He shook his head and tried to drown it out. If he did not just open the door and kill her, it would take hours to get Buel to leave him alone. She had been denied her precious prize. For a moment he imagined the rage that must have consumed her when she saw the Enterprise, that most golden of gooses, destroyed in a fantastic blast. He smiled and took it as one last corporeal treat.

The banging increased, “There’s a warrant out for us for five sectors! Do you have any idea what you’ve done? The Enterprise lost one of their damn engineers. That’s a warrant out for murder, Reed!”

His last breath rushed out of him in a gasp. One of their engineers? One? He spun around on the bed and let his eyes narrow through the dark. “What are you talking about?”

“Agh!” Buel fumed through the door. “You son-of-a-bitch! I nearly get caught on the Federation flag ship, and for what? So I could activate you’re faulty computer program. You failed, Reed! Their ship was disabled for less than ten minutes!”

“No!” He flew from the bed and slammed into the door before it could fully open. Buel leapt back with a start, but she could not avoid his stretching reach. His fingers found her throat and slammed her against the corridor bulked with a violent thud. “If you’re lying, I’ll kill you! The Enterprise was destroyed! There was a warp core breach!”

Buel’s face was beginning to turn red, and he pressed his arm against her chest to keep her flailing hands from reaching the disruptor on her hip.

“No—” She gasped, turning her face to gain just enough air. “I…followed to…make sure. They—” Her eyes were beginning to tear over, and Reed grabbed the disruptor from her holster as he let her fall to the deck. She rolled on to her knees and gasped desperately for breath.

“What did you see? Answer me!”

“They ejected their core!” She finally managed, her face as red with rage as well as pain. She crawled to the bulked and scrambled to regain her feet.

“No. That’s not possible! No one could have ejected the core. I made sure!” He pressed his hands to his temples and growled. He had been so careful. He was always careful. He had known from the moment he set foot on the Enterprise that sacking her would be nearly impossible, so he had implanted a destruction algorithm just in case they became a threat. How could anything go wrong! “You’re lying.” He said, pointing Buel’s own disruptor down at her. “If they ejected their core, that means my overload was successful, and if the overload was successful, no one could
.. have possibly gotten close enough to eject he core.”

Buel sobbed, nearly hysterical with rage, and gave him a piercing look from under her brow. “Maybe it was one their androids! Did you account for that? Or is revenge making you sloppy?”

It was as if his heart froze in the middle of a beat, and he dropped the disruptor several inches.

“Yeah, I know.” Buel gasped over mad, bitter laughter. “I know all about you and that gold eyed tinker toy! Well you know what? Kill your own enemies on your own damn time.”

“You bitch.” He whispered. He was going to kill her. In the blink of an eye he decided, but for some reason his hand just would not move.

Buel scrambled back to the corner with her eyes still fixed on the barrel of her disruptor. “You know what else, Reed? When that thing comes looking for you, don’t expect any help.”

Reed’s hands grew cold and the disruptor clattered to the deck. The corridor seemed to turn like a funnel wheel, and he grasped for the bulked as he slid down. “No! No! Lydi!” He slammed his fist against the hard metal until it was smeared with his blood and the pain turned his entire body into a convulsing knot. But under his bloody, broken hand he did not see the dull black metal of the wall. He saw a pair of fierce gold eyes laughing at him, and no matter how hard he struck the laughter would not stop.
Chapter 25

“Do you people never tire of being presumptuous?”

Lore stretched forward on his stomach until his eyes peered just over the ledge. The third level catwalk was nearly forty feet above the main engineering floor, and was so narrow that half his body still lay in the Jefferies tube from which he had crawled. Still, he had no trouble discerned every detail on the floor below. LaForge stood at the center control table with a half organized stack of data pads in front of him, each one of which Lore could read perfectly. Data stood opposite of him with one of the pads in his hand.

“I do not believe that the destructive program is self-replicating. We have eliminated ninety-eight percent of the commands issues, and I have not seen any regeneration.” Data said to LaForge as he placed the pad in one of the particular stacks.

“Good. One less problem we have to deal with.” LaForge sighed and picked up another pad as if it weighed a ton. Lore too sighed and looked over the rest of the room. LaForge and Data did not interest him now. He was much more interested in the steady activity at the base of the warp core, and he stretched forward a few more inches to get a better view.

From his vantage point high above the main floor he could see six crewmen working at various points around the core, securing clamps and double checking others. It was no small thing to eject a core manually. The process essentially ruptured all of the docking clamps, and the sudden expulsion of such a large object left the surrounding rim of the deck cracked and buckled in places. Crews had been working for three days to repair the superficial damage after having pulled double shifts to repair the essential components. At least Lore assumed as much, for this was the first time he had seen main engineering in more than a week.

Two crewmen lifted a large section of buckled deck-plate and carried it away with slow steps. As soon as they were clear, the only red-haired engineer lowered herself into the exposed crawl space under the deck. She looked up to speak to one of her colleagues standing over her, and her face was finally visible.

Anna!

Lore stretched further with reckless disregard for his cover and had the terrible feeling that he could not make himself breath. In the last few days it had become an almost common thing, except he had only been thinking of her. Now that he could actually see her, it was almost… painful? Ridiculous! He brought his hands to the edge of the catwalk and rested his chin over them as he gazed down at the people below. He could no longer see her face, for from his high position he could see only the tops of their heads, but the sound of her voice troubled him. It was not playful or light as it often was with her shipmates.

“We, eh…we should redo the carpeting over this deck section. I don’t think it’s going to hold, and…um, someone’s going to trip eventually.” Anna said in a low, distant tone, as if she were reciting something that bored her.

A blond head of hair, smooth and overly styled in Lore’s opinion, came to Anna’s side and handed her a tool kit. “Carpeting?” Larson complained. “I can’t believe I spent three years knee-deep in warp theory so that I could re-upholster the floors. This place is a wreck.”
“You’re welcome, jerk!”

“Okay.” Anna muttered in a sour tone. “I’ll tell Lore to be a little more careful next time he’s dying of radiation exposure.”

Larson mumbled a few unintelligible words before he turned to resume his work near the crystal chamber. Lore pressed a smile into his folded hands and practically squirmed with joy. She defended him. That was something. She would not speak to him, but at least she did not hate him! It was a small pleasure, but a potent one none-the-less. For days he had sat in his quarters, pressed down by the horrifying thought that the only person he cared about would not even speak to him. He had only himself to blame, did he not? He had shown his worst side at the worst possible moment. Why would she speak to him? Why did she ever?

He continued to watch the monotonous work below with a grateful fascination, for even he had to admit that part of him longed to be among them. After all, he did not like his quarters. It was true that he had escaped to there, but it was no haven. He longed to be at her side again, even if it meant the silence that he had once insisted upon. But humans were different. When they refused to speak to someone it had very little to do with the preference of silence. It was a punishment, a non-violent slap over and over again, and the sting was starting to drive him to despair. I miss you, Anna. I’m sorry. Please talk to me.

Anna finally stood in the open deck and stretched her aching shoulders for a few moments. Her face tilted up with closed eyes, for much of the crew had gained little sleep in the last few days. She was tired. Her hair kept flying away from its holds, and shallow lines traced circles under her eyes. Regardless, Lore held his breath and studied every ivory curve of her face. He knew that she was attractive, for he was no fool when it came to humans and their ways, but never before had the idea struck him so forcefully. She was the most beautiful person he had ever seen.

“Lore. I did not know that you had continued volunteering in engineering.”

Lore flipped onto his side and pushed himself away from the edge of the catwalk. Only a few feet down Varek had emerged from another of the Jefferies tube hatches and knelt down on the narrow walk. Like the typical Vulcan, he hardly looked surprised to see something unexpected.

“None of your damn business.” Lore retorted and immediately began to push himself back into the Jefferies tube. He glanced over the edge once more, but Anna had turned her face back down. Disappointment gripped him.

“Since main engineering is restricted to authorized personnel and those with temporary authorization, it is indeed my business.” Varek replied as he opened his tool case and began pulling back the face of a small control panel.

“Good for you.” Lore spat, “Tell Worf that I’m up here sabotaging the ship. It should be good entertainment for everyone.”

Varek raised a curious eyebrow, “I do not believe that you’re presence here indicates malicious intent. May I make a suggestion?”

This should be good. Lore turned himself in preparation from a hasty retreat. “By all means.” He snorted.

“If you wish to see Lieutenant Hall, perhaps you should approach her during off duty hours.”
Lore halted and gripped the deck grates till they cracked, “What did you say?”

“You are here to see Lieutenant Hall, are you not?” Varek asked with typical Vulcan nonchalance. “Since this access panel is the only issued maintenance required in this section, I must surmise that your purpose here has nothing to do with maintenance. You are here to observe main engineering undetected, and taking into account your previous exhibitions of fascination with Lt. Hall, I assumed that—”

“Exhibitions!” Lore growled and swiped his hand across the deck, sending Varek’s tool kit over the ledge. It clattered against the main core strut and struck the deck below to many shouts and condemnations.

“What’s going on up there!” LaForge shouted from below. Lore pressed himself down and against the bulked. What explanation would he give? What treachery would they accuse him of now?

Varek cocked his head at Lore with a smooth I-told-you-so air and leaned out over the edge, “Forgive me, Commander! I should have kept my tool case in a better position!”

Lore was struck. It wasn’t a lie. Not really.

“Yeah, ya think.” LaForge muttered, far too low for Varek to hear, and the indistinct grumbles seemed to indicate that everyone was going back to their previous tasks.

Lore drew back up on his knees, slowly, and gave Varek a cautious look, “Why didn’t you tell them I was up here?”

Varek considered for a moment as he returned to his maintenance task, “It has been my observation that the crew tends to overreact to much of what you do. It would be merely an interruption of ship’s operations if they were to overreact again.” He reached down as if to retrieve another tool and paused when he recalled that the box was no longer there. “For a machine, your temper is rather unruly.”

I’ll show you ‘unruly’.... “You don’t know anything about me.”

“On the contrary.” Varek objected without the slightest indication of fear, “I am well versed in the particulars of your past endeavors, as is most of the crew. I am also well aware that it was highly unlikely you would have survived the radiation exposure necessary for you to manually eject the warp core. This fact leads me, and most others, to conclude that you have no malicious intend toward this ship or its crew. Is that ‘knowing’ enough?”

Lore balked at the undeniable logic, “Shut up!” It was bad enough having Troi analyze him. Getting the same treatment from an unemotional source was almost worse. He turned his back and moved into the Jefferies tube, but only made it a few feet before he stopped and ground his teeth together. Exhibitions, huh? What had he meant by that? Vulcan’s almost never exaggerated. In fact, they were notorious for understatement. Deciding that he could not risk ignorance, he turned around and met Varek’s curious expression once more. “What did you mean when you said I exhibit fascination with Lt. Hall?” He almost choked on the words.

Varek surveyed the few small tools on his belt and selected one. “Perhaps my phrasing was inappropriate. Your attentions to Lt. Hall have been quite subtle, at least to causal onlookers, but Vulcan’s tend to be more observant than humans.”

“That’s an impressive non-answer.” Lore retorted, “What do you mean?”
Varek stopped his work now and gave Lore a rather perplexed look. “Perhaps my observations have been inaccurate? You are not in love with Lt. Hall?”

“In l—. Listen, Vulcan, I don’t know what you think you know about anything, but—”

“—You stare at Lt. Hall, apparently without cause and only when she does not notice.”

“I don’t—”

“I have noted no less than sixteen unexplained alterations to the duty roster, all designed to steer Lt. Hall away from working with other members of the crew.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“Also, I was present in the turbo lift moments before you left to eject the core. You told Lt. Hall to go with Commander Data, indicating that you were particularly concerned with her survival. You were holding her hand, a behavior often exhibited by Humans who—”

“Enough!” Lore growled under his breath. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the sense of exposure, but it was little use. He did not know how to react. Nothing Varek had said was untrue, but that meant that he loved Anna? That was ridiculous! He might watch her sometimes, but certainly that wasn’t staring. And so he had changed the duty roster a few times. So what? He preferred to work with her; was that a crime? He drew back toward the Jefferies tube and gave Varek a threatening glare.

Varek shook his head, “If you are concerned that I might divulge your feelings to others, you need not worry. I find little interest in ship’s gossip.”

The urge to reach out and break his arrogant neck was so strong Lore could almost taste it. As if the arrogant assumption that he knew anything about Lore’s feelings was not insulting enough, Varek had the audacity to not even be afraid! He moved a bit closer, and Varek finally showed signs of caution. “Here’s some logic for you, Vulcan. Has Data ever been in ‘love’?” He sneered at the word as if he were reciting the name of some flesh eating disease.

Varek seemed perplexed. “I have never personally witnessed any outward signs that Commander Data has had those feelings. Why?”

“Well, since Data is the only other android to observe, and you haven’t seen it in him, what the hell makes you think your observations of me are worth anything! You want to argue logically, fine. You’re basing your assumptions on a model that doesn’t fit.” Lore was satisfied enough, and he could not for the life of him understand why. Years ago he would have simply killed this man, or at least injured him badly, and he would certainly not have carried the conversation or bothered to argue with him. How he had changed!

Varek closed his eyes slightly and nodded, “I will grant you that I do not have an appropriately matching model to form my theory.”

Ha!

“However, your creation was based purposely on the human model, and since your other emotional displays appear to fit that model, it is an allowable assumption that all of them would. I still maintain that you are in love with Lt. Hall. Or at least infatuated with her.”

Lore practically snarled and swung around to the Jefferies tube. It was the most violent thing he could do without throwing Varek over the ledge, not that he hadn’t considered it for many
nanoseconds. *Infatuated? Infatuated!* As he crawled away down the tube at his fastest pace and recalled the many—so very many—things he had been called over the years, he was sure that this was the most insulting thing ever wielded at him. He was not *infatuated* with Anna! That word implied something greedy and possessive, something…physical.

“Idiot Vulcan!” He spat as he came to the junction room and let himself fall down the ladder well with a loud thunk. He turned to continue, but froze. He had gone the wrong way. As utterly impossible as it was for him to make a mistake, he had been distracted and taken the usual route back toward main engineering rather than continuing on. He began to consider the possibility that his distracted lapses recently had something to do with the remainder of his unfinished matrix connectors, when he heard footsteps and froze. There wasn’t enough time to make it up the ladder, not even for him, and he darted toward the inside wall. A storage locker there left a two foot empty space before the next wall, and he pressed himself there silently.

“I just need a few more cable filaments before we can go.” Came a low, muttering voice. Lore recognized it instantly as the officer he had overheard in sickbay, Lt. Briggs.

“No hurry. It’s the last thing on the list, and I don’t think there’s anything scheduled for stellar cartography today.” Anna replied, also in a low, tired voice. Lore closed his eyes and turned his face away, as if it would somehow soothe the urge to lean out and look at her. She sounded so tired, so sad.

“Uh…Lieutenant?” Briggs said cautiously.

Anna chuckled, “You’re a Lieutenant and my friend, Alan. You can call me Anna.”

“Okay, Anna.” Briggs laughed in reply. There were a few banging noises as he opened the adjoining locker. “I hope you don’t think I’m being nosey, but um, why hasn’t Lore been down here in engineering? After what he did, I figured he would be…I don’t know…*more* sociable?”

Anna sighed heavily and Lore felt her lean against the locker. “I, eh…I don’t know, Alan. I don’t know what he’s doing.”

“You’re not talking to him,?”

Lore cringed. *No, she isn’t.*

“Alan….” Anna groaned and pushed herself away from the locker, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Did he say something? It must have been bad if, I mean….He almost got himself killed, Anna, for the ship.”

Lore covered his face with his hands. He could not be sure if he would be able to keep silent otherwise, for he could not believe that someone was actually pleading his case.

“You don’t understand, Alan. It doesn’t have anything to do with that.” Anna sighed.

“He’s always been nice to you. Well, as nice as he can be, I guess.” Briggs continued, “If he said something, maybe he—”

“He’s nice to *me*, Alan, that’s the problem.” Anna paused, and Lore imagined her running her fingers over her hair, as she did when she was frustrated. “He’s so nasty to everyone *but* me. If I’m just pleased that he treats me differently, isn’t that like saying that I don’t care about anyone but myself? I *want* to be his friend, but he—.I don’t want to talk about it.”
Oh… Lore held his breath and covered his mouth with his hands. It was like being punched in the stomach, but what would he know about such things? He had never experienced pain. He had only experienced this!

“Oh.” Briggs muttered and locked the locker with a few clicks. “I’m sorry I asked. I guess it’s none of my business.”

“Don’t worry about it, Alan. Let’s just get up to stellar cartography so we can finish up. I’m exhausted.”

Lore turned toward her as they left, as if he could see her straight through the steel finished locker, and pressed his forehead against the wall. It made no sense for him to be upset now, for he had suspected all that she had said. Hearing it was far worse. After a few cautious minutes he stepped back to the ladder and slowly ascended, not even sure of where he would go or what he would do. Unlike the humans, he could not kill tortuous hours with sleep.
“This is a machine we’re talking about here!”

It was a sight that most of them saw in their waking dreams. The bars, slips, and strips of latinum tumbled over one another like a golden avalanche. A few pieces fell unceremoniously to the floor and stopped short of touching their feet. Buel Kala pulled her eyes from the enticing bounty and fixed them on Reed’s cold face. He still held the empty container over the table, as if the last drop of latinum would run out.

“I’m no fool.” Reed said as he tossed the empty container onto the floor. “No doubt every one of you now knows why I targeted the Enterprise and why I wanted to destroy it.”

“We don’t get paid by destroying ships!” Growled the heavy set Nausicaan standing at ops. He leaned angrily against the railing as if he were trying to smell the latinum now scattered across the table.

“Nor do we make money by destroying rare and valuable objects.” Sneered Klars, a short, round Ferengi. He collected himself and looked up again, “This Lore is a Soong android. Very rare. Very valuable. I can think of a few collectors myself who would pay handsomely—”

“Shut up!” Reed growled and slammed his fists on the table. Several pieces of latinum fell to the floor. “Shut up and listen. I have an offer to make, and it should satisfy your expectations of profit. This.” He brushed his hand carelessly over the pile of latinum, “is all yours, evenly divided, if you agree to help me.”

The crew, a bizarre collection of mismatched species and backgrounds, exchanged suspicious looks. Reed had never been particularly voracious in his pursuit of bounty, but he had never been squeamish about protecting his share either.

“You would give us your profits?” Klars balked, his Ferengi mind unable to comprehend such an act. “Whatever for? Surely you could hire some bounty hunter for a fraction of this—”

“Shut up, Klars!” Buel hissed as she leveled a threatened hand over him. She wanted to hear what Reed had to say, although she hardly believed a word of it. “This is a bad plan, even for you, Reed. Why would we help you when we could simply take your latinum here and now.”

Klars gasped and took a protective step back. Even the Nausicaan’s posture stiffened as if he expected a fight, but Reed did not move. He did not even look alarmed. “Practical to a fault, Buel. But so am I. This is exactly one eighth of my total wealth, and since there are only five of you, you can each expect to collect more than what you see here. That is, if you’re willing to help me. Otherwise, you can kill me now and see how far each of you gets on one fifth of this.”

Buel kept her stance ridged, for there was something in Reed’s cold expression that made the skin on the back of her neck crawl. To the untrained observer it would have appeared that Reed was reckless in his endeavors, but Buel knew better. His plans were meticulous to a fault, with no chance of failure. At least they had been until now. Buel could see the glint of the gold-pressed latinum staining the eyes of the crew, and in it she could see her chance to take command slipping
away. “If this android is on the Federation flagship it has to mean that they’re protecting it. You think we can take a Federation flagship?”

Reed stared at Buel for several seconds, but still his expression did not change. “Yes, I do. But we won’t. It draws too much attention, and your money won’t do you much good if Starfleet is hunting you down. Lore isn’t a prisoner aboard the Enterprise. He won’t stay on board forever.”

“Wait just a second!” The Nausicaan descended from his place at ops, his neck craning from side to side in the grotesque animal manner of his species, “Are you saying that we will simply follow this ship and wait until this machine shows its’ head? I think the human half of you has damaged your mind, Reed.”

The space between Reed’s eyes shrank and his teeth showed in an angry grimace. “You don’t want to be paid to do nothing? You couldn’t hope to procure a tenth of what I’m offering you if you robbed every damn ship in this sector! We follow the Enterprise, we wait. Think of it as a well deserved vacation.” It was clear now that he was working to maintain his control. His face was ruddy and unshaven, his hair even more disheveled than usual, and an unexplained cut in the center of his forehead was red and inflamed. “Yes or no!”

Klars fidgeted his fingers together and shook his massive head several times. “Ah, it just doesn’t make sense! I mean, I understand revenge, but a machine? I had a replicator once that kept burning me with overheated plates. You think I’d waste time tracking that thing down?”

Reed stretched across the table so quickly that even Buel had little time to react. He grabbed Klars by the front of his ornate purple suit and slammed him down against the pile of latinum. “Machine! A machine! You have no idea what he is! Machines don’t seek power. Machines don’t use monsters to kill people!” Reed drew a harsh breath and shoved Klars away from him. For several long seconds the others looked on, unsure of how to react to the change they saw. Reed had never been a Vulcan in any traditional sense, but he had always seemed more in control than not. That imbalance had flipped.

Reed hissed and turned away toward the door. “Make your decisions.” He slid through the door in a blur, gone as quickly as he had come.

“What the hell was that!” Cried the young man who had been watching the entire scene from his place across the room. He rose finally from his seat and came toward the others. “Is he serious?”

“Perhaps you would like to be excluded, Conner, if you have a problem betraying your own!” Klars spat back. He reached for several strips of latinum near him before Buel slapped his hand.

“Shut your mouth, Ferengi!” Conner sneered, “Not all humans are Starfleet.”

“But enough Starfleet officers are human.” The Nausicaan supplied.

“Shut up! All of you just shut up!” Buel commanded. She pinched the bridge of her nose as she began to walk around the table. Damnit! This was not what she had expected to happen. She had been prepared to present her case to the crew, to convince them that Reed had lost his mind and that it was in everyone’s best interest if she were to take command. But now this! She should have known he would do such a thing.

“I think we should do it.” Conner said and looked at each of them in turn. “We’d be crazy not to.”
“Shut up! Let me think about this.” Buel waved a dismissive hand at the human and continued to muse over the pile of latinum.

“Think about what? Your morals?” Klars laughed at each of them. “This is a machine we’re talking about here! If Reed’s lost his mind, that’s not my problem, and if he wants to spend every strip of latinum he has to track down some hunk of metal that fell on his wife, it’s to my profit.”

“Agreed.” The Nausicaan snarled. “If Reed wishes to be a fool, I see no reason why I should stop him.”

Buel smiled behind her hand, seeing her role clearly. “This won’t be as easy as Reed is making it out to be. Do any of you know a thing about this android?”

Conner released a loud breath, “Yeah. Yeah, I know a few things. He was responsible for all those Borg attacks a few years after the battle at Wolf three-five-nine. He destroyed a few Starfleet vessels too.”

Buel nodded slowly, “That’s right.”

“Ha!” Klars shook under a pleased laugh, his round frame shaking like an apple on a branch, “Fine! Better than killing a worthless machine, we kill a bad one. I will consider it a very profitable bit of community service. Why are we debating this? Think of all the women I could buy with that much latinum!”

“Oh, for God’s sake…. Conner muttered.

Buel grinned, “Are we all agreed, then?”

There was a heavy silence in the room while varying smiles spread across varying faces.

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Anna awoke with a start and rolled her face into her pillow. Her breathing was heavy and she gripped the edge of her blanket while she waited for her heart to stop pounding. She could not see the clock but was sure that it was still early. She did not feel as if she had slept very long.

“Computer, low lights.”

The accents light along the ceiling edge produced a grey hue just bright enough to make out the room. Anna rolled over once more as if she might fall asleep again, but it was no use. She sat up and instinctively pulled the old quilt up to her chin. For years she had shared her quarters with someone else, the inevitable drudge of being an Ensign. Remembering her privileged privacy, she dropped the quilt and ran her fingers through her hair. The air in the room was cold against her bare skin.

“Computer, current navigation?” She whispered.

“On route to star base four-two-five. ETA four hours, twenty minutes.”

Anna sighed and flopped back onto her pillow. Nothing had happened while she slept to change their course, which was a relief. She had not expected any kind of crisis, but the images from her
dream had put her into an anxious state. It had been years since she had felt that way from a dream. Once, when she had been quite young, she had dreamed that her little dog had escaped the yard and fallen into the canal near the house. She had woken up that night, drenched in sweat, and padded down the stairs in a panic until she found the little dog sleeping on her pad near the back door. The next morning, the neighbors had found their little terrier drowned in the canal. Now, she had the same heavy weight in the bottom of her stomach.

Anna threw the blankets back and made her way gingerly to the replicator. She was awake but her legs and back objected to the movement. “Computer, room temp water.” The replicator produced the glass and she forced herself to drink most of it in one take. It did not help, and the weight in her stomach only deepened.

“Computer, where is Lore?”

“Lore is in assigned guest quarters three.”

“Is he all right?”

There was a pause from the computer, “Unknown. Biometric data does not extend to requested subject.”

Anna finished the water and set the glass on the sill. She wasn’t going to be getting any sleep that night.
Chapter 27

“We mounted up, he first and I the second,
Till I beheld through a round aperture
Some of the beauteous things that Heaven doth bear;
Thence we came forth to rebehold the stars.”
—Dante Alghieri, Inferno.

“That’s it?” Lore scoffed and turned over the next page. Surely Dante and the archangel had not gotten out that easily. There had to be some obstacle, otherwise all those other damned souls would just stroll out whenever they pleased. Perhaps there was some unseen obstacle keeping them all there. Maybe a forcefield?

Humans are ridiculous. He shook his head and flipped over to the next page, but he was too angry about Dante’s Inferno to just switch to the next story. Surely there was another installment that had not been included in this small, antique volume. Well, if there were multiple installments, why print just one? Idiots! I want to know what happened!

He closed the book, his finger still marking the place. “Computer, is there a second installment to the story Dante’s Inferno?”

“Dante’s Inferno refers to the first installment of the trilogy work The Divine Comedy, by Italian author Dante Alghieri.”

“Three parts.” He muttered, “What’s the second?”

“Pergatorio.”

“Bring it up on the side screen in full text.” He closed the small volume Anna had given him and took it back to the shelf. As he did, his mind wrapped over the images Dante had described, each more grotesque and terrifying than the next. Of course, they would have been terrifying to Thirteenth century humans, Lore assured himself. Every eternal punishment Dante described in the fictitious work somehow or another always required physical pain, and since he was incapable of feeling that, he could only wonder. That was what the painful isolation was doing to him. It was making him wonder ridiculous, unthinkable things. What if humans had been right about going somewhere after they died? Would he go there to? What nonsense! Even most humans did not believe such things any more.

If there is a heaven, I’m not going there.

The text of Dante’s Pergatorio appeared on the screen in harsh white letters, and Lore wished he had the text in the rough, yellowing pages of Anna’s book. He liked it better, but his curiosity was being insistent, and so he stood before the screen and read at the same slow, human pace. He had thought that reading these silly, pointless stories would distract him, but he had not been prepared for their…revealing nature. One of the Omicron Theta colonists had once described his
work in the colony’s docking station as ‘the tenth circle of Hell’. Lore had read every word of every journal his father had placed inside his memory banks, and not until three hours ago had Lore ever known what it meant. In fact, after having read more than three quarters of the little book, he was sure he now understood nearly twelve literary references that had always eluded him. It was pointless, worthless information, and yet he was pleased to have it. It was something new. It was something that, for a short time, distracted him from what he really longed for.

The door chimed and Lore looked up sharply from the bright screen. He had a good guess who it was. “Go away, Troi. I don’t want to talk to you.”

“I think we’ve done this before, Lore. Do you want me to repeat my lines?”

There was no hesitation this time. Lore rushed to the door and pressed the panel in haste. When the door opened, he stood frozen before Anna. She held her hands calmly in front of her and he was startled by the way she looked firmly up at him.

“How did this go last time?” Anna said with a sarcastic tilt of her head, “I said ‘let me in’, and you said ‘go away’, and I forced my way in. What else? Ah, yes.” She raised her hands up in front of her and pressed her wrists together, “Now’s your cue to push me out and tell me to never come back.”

He clenched his teeth, “That won’t be necessary.”

“Then, can I come in?”

He stepped back cautiously, not sure if it was wise to show just how eager he was. Anna moved into the room and hovered a few feet from the door. She kept looking back at him over her shoulder, as if she were trying to analyze him unnoticed.

“You don’t have to examine me.” He said, “My unfinished connector repairs are easily bypassed.”

“I see.” She muttered, “Otherwise, you’re…alright?”

“Yes. Surely you didn’t come here to check on my health?” I wish….

“Why not?” She shot back, “The way you smacked Data’s hand away, you could be dead in here for all anyone knew!”

Lore said nothing.

She shifted her weight suddenly in an awkward fashion, and stepped toward the replicator. The book she had given him lay on its side in the center of the shelf, different from the position in which she had left it. She scooped it up and ran her fingers through the pages. “Did you read this?” She asked with some surprise.

She laughed, amazed, and also ran her eyes over the active screen next to the replicator. “Dante’s Purgatory. You’re reading this?”

He liked this direction of conversation. “It’s your fault. You gave me a book containing just the first installment.”
“Oh, *Inferno* stands alone.” She assured him with an amused smile. “Thank you for reading it. I wasn’t sure if you would.”

He stepped forward and took the book from her, holding up the cover in a show. “Yes, I did. And for future reference, you might want to suggest something happier. *Horrifying Tales of Misery and Woe.*”

She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. “Those Victorians liked ghost stories. Besides, you can complain about the ‘misery and woe’ while we’re eating dinner.”

His eyes widened. “Does this mean you forgive me?”

“Yes.” She said matter-of-factly. “Besides, I suppose I do owe you some lee way to be a miserable, unsociable jerk. You’ve saved my life. Twice.”

“Jerk?”

“I had something worse, but I’m nicer than you. Come on. Let’s eat.” In a playful show of force, she took him by the wrist and began to pull him toward the door.

“Anna.” He said, stopping her, “I don’t understand. I thought you had made yourself quite clear that you didn’t want to speak to me anymore. Why are you here?”

Her expression fell and she looked away from him, “I’m entitled to change my mind.”

He met that response with a raised brow. Anna sighed and looked around the room several times. “I suppose you won’t believe me if I just say I was wrong.”

“No, I won’t, because you weren’t.” He replied. Her words in main engineering still rang in his ears. What had changed since then? “I know you think I treat other people badly.”

She sighed again, “Maybe I’m willing to overlook it. Maybe I like you more than other people.”

For a brief second Lore’s insides felt hot, and he could swear her had the sensation of a warm liquid floating in his stomach. But the sensation subsided when Anna put on a facetious smile. He decided it was best not to press the matter, and besides, he was a bit confused by the sensation he had just felt.

“I will go only on one condition.” He said with a most suppressed smile.

“Hmm…what?” She said, taking his arm again.

“I get to embarrass you the entire way there.”

She pulled harder, “Fine by me.”

Lore laughed happily and let his fingers brush against her hand as they emerged into the corridor. “Agh! Leave me alone, Hall! Be friends with someone else!” He bellowed.

Anna snickered to herself and continued to drag him toward the turbo lift. “Oh, quit belly aching!”

He laughed as he followed her, feeling more relieved than he could truly fathom. He felt as if some tired thing had finally ended, and he never wanted to return to it again. He never wanted to be without her company again. They both stepped into the turbo lift and, to his disappointment, Anna released his hand. It was only a few yards from the lift to Anna’s door, and she immediately moved
to the replicator once they entered.

“I have something special in mind. I know you’re going to like this.” She began sorting through a list on the replicator screen while Lore stopped next to her desk. He ran his fingers over the melted edge of the candle there and inhaled deeply. The whole room smelt of lavender candles and the soft sunflower scent of Anna’s soap. He had never thought that smells could be so good.

“Have you ever heard of Chicken Marsala?” Anna said as she turned away from the replicator with two steaming plates in hand.

He smiled awkwardly and took his hand away from the candle. He wasn’t sure why, but he was uncomfortable with her kindness. Was she not going to lecture him about Data? “I have heard of it. Thank you.”

Anna set the plates on the low table near the sofa and sat herself there on the floor. Lore shrugged at the odd seating arrangement and joined her on the floor in front of one of the arm chairs. What he wanted to say to her seemed terribly inappropriate, for he was not sure how she would take knowing that he had missed her. So, he ran his eyes over the room again. Her uniform was hung over the back of her desk chair, and the old white quilt on her bed was tossed back, unmade.

Anna got up suddenly and retrieved a glass of water from the replicator. “Do you want a drink?” She asked. He shook his head and she returned to her seat. As she sat, she smiled, “When you ate the strawberries in Ten Forward, was that really the first time you had eaten?”

Lore laughed, “Yes. You asked me that then. Is it so hard to believe?”

“A little. Didn’t you ever have to pretend?”

Lore was uncomfortable for only a moment. It was a question about his past, which was dangerous, but he decided he could navigate it. “I did drink occasionally to fool some people. I even pretended to sleep a few times, but eating never came up.”

Anna took another bite of food and smiled as she chewed.

“What?” He ventured

“I’m just trying to imagine what you would look like as a human. I think you’re eyes would be…blue, no! Brown.”

He frowned playfully, “I prefer the way I really look.”

“Me too.”

His smiled was difficult to control, but he managed. He ate several more bites in silence. Had he really been missing this all those years? The food was amazing.

“Lore, can I ask you something?” Anna said after a small bite of food.

“Of course.” He replied. You can ask me anything.

She hesitated and spun her fork around the pasta on her plate. “Why can’t you apologize to Data?”

Lore closed his eyes briefly and sighed. Please, Anna. I don’t want to talk about this. “I can’t,
Anna. Don’t ask me to.”

She was surprised by that, and shook her head. “I would never ask you do something like that. It’s none of my business, but…you can’t even get along with him. You can’t even let him help you when you’re injured.”

Lore dug the side of his fork into the moist chicken on his plate. “He won’t apologize to me.” He waited for a response, but Anna only drew a quick breath and dropped her eyes to her plate. He knew what she was thinking. “You don’t have to spare my feelings, Anna. You think Data has no reason to apologize to me. You think I deserved everything he did to me.”

“Lore.” She sighed and brushed her loose hair away from her face. “I—That is not what I think.”

He speared a square of chicken onto his fork and looked at it. “It’s what I think. He’s right. I did deserve it.” He drew a breath and brought the fork to his mouth. It was wonderful.

Anna twirled a mound of pasta on to her fork and was silent. He had not left her much to say, for how did someone respond to such a thing? “If that’s true, what do you want him to apologize for?”

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to talk about this, and especially now when he just wanted to enjoy her company, but there was something about her that made it easier than he would have imagined. “I’m not angry with Data for what he did. I’m angry for why he did it.” Now it was his turn to awkwardly spin pasta onto his fork. “I deserved everything Data did to me, Anna. In fact, I think I got off light considering that I’m even alive. But I—I just want him to admit why he did it!”

“I don’t understand.” She said, honest concern making her face.

He put his fork down, “If I had been a human, Data would never have transported me into open space. If I had been human, the crew of this ship would not even have left my body out there. If I had been human, Data would not have shot me in the back and disassembled me like a damaged warp coil!” He leaned away from the table and fell back against the foot of the chair. As much as he wanted to hide his temper from Anna, he could not. There was no being calm about this. “He values them more than us.”

Anna lowered her fork onto the plate and sat with her hands in her lap. “I didn’t know that. There was never any—”

“Inquiry? Never any question about his actions? Of course there wasn’t. Data has the luxury of being a ‘person’ because he’s on their side, because it suits them. He doesn’t see that.” He cringed and turned away. He knew he was being rueful again, but he could not help it.

“The Federation court let you go, Lore. They said what happened to you was wrong. Is that not proof enough that their ethics do extend further than just what ‘suits them’.” Anna replied. There was a hint of defiance in her voice, as if she were pleading her own defense. “Besides, maybe Data is more like you than you think.”

He looked up, “What does that mean?”

“Maybe he knows what he did was wrong and he just can’t say it. Maybe Data is just as stubborn and proud as you.”

Lore laughed aloud. “Data is not proud! He’s modest to a fault!”
She took a bite of pasta and smiled as she chewed. “How much time have you spent with Data since you were reassembled? Two, maybe three hours total in nearly seven months?”

Lore sighed, “One hour, seventeen minutes total. So what?”

Her smile widened, “You don’t know him. You don’t know a thing about him.”

“I don’t know him?” Lore balked. “Data is nothing if not consistent. You don’t have to spend much time with him to know all there is to know.”

“Maybe.” Anna replied over chewing, “But that was Data, pre emotion chip. You don’t know this Data. Think of it like magnets, Lore. The reason you and Data repel is because you’re the same.”

He dropped his hands into his lap and stared at her. “That is the meanest thing you have ever said to me.”

She laughed and shook her head, “Proof that I do actually like you, Lore. Will you answer another question for me?”

Lore pressed his lips to hide a smile. “Fine.”

“Just how long were you lying on the cat walk above engineering today?”

“Varek!” He cried, dropping his fork to his plate. “That miserable, pointy eared—.”

“Varek didn’t tell me anything.”

“Then how did you know?”

Anna swirled some pasta onto her fork and stopped it just before her lips, “I asked the computer where you were.”

Oh, my….

After a few moments in which they ate in silence, he felt her hand rest on his under the table. Again, the sense of warmth was shocking; the way it seemed to flow up his arm and to every corner of his being made no sense.

“Yeah, I missed you too.” She said with a playful smile and squeezed his hand once before letting it go. She pointed at the food with her fork, “So, what do you think?”

Lore took a few deep breaths. It was all he could do to resist reaching out and brushing the red hair away from her face. It was such an odd inclination. He loved it. “I think I like it.” He said, taking another bite.

And I think Varek is right.
“My, he’s very handsome.”

“So that’s it, then?” Riker said gruffly. He followed next to Captain Picard as they both headed swiftly in the direction of the airlock.

“That is it.” Picard replied. He jutted his chin forward in a subtle attempt to adjust the uncomfortable high collar of his dress uniform, but it was to no avail. “Patrols in this sector are reporting a sharp decline in piracy incidents, and they have had no sightings on long range sensors of Reed’s vessel.”

“We know he has a cloaking device.”

“And we know Reed is damn good at using it, too.” Picard stopped at the entrance to the airlock and faced his first officer, “I’m just as skeptical as you, Number One, but we have exhausted every possible lead and Admiral Janeway was very clear. We’re resuming our schedule. Again.”

Riker nodded. It was confirmation of what he already knew. For nearly two weeks they had scoured the sector for Reed’s vessel or any sign of him. Starfleet informants on nearly a dozen outposts and stations had been given descriptions of Reed and the Bajoran woman, but none had reported anything useful. There were, of course, suspicions.

“Do you think he’s dead, Sir?”

Picard scoffed, “Do you?”

“Not a chance.”

Picard merely nodded his agreement and faced the airlock. An attendant opened the door just in time for him to put on a forced smile. He hated diplomatic events such as these.

“Ah, Meester Picard!” Shouted the man standing at the other end of the airlock. He was a large, jovial man with cheeks like meat patties and a head of wildly curly white hair. Like all Sholans, his cheek bones were sharp and very pronounced, and swept up over his temples to disappear under his grey hair. Also like all Sholans, his skin was as white as paper and his eyes as gold as latinum.

Picard could never get over how much they resembled Data.

“Hello, Ambassador Teth.” Picard nodded, but the formality was lost on the man who quickly took Picard by the shoulders and gave him a great raucous hug. Picard cringed, but managed a quick smile as the man pulled back, “I’m, eh…Ambassador, this is my first officer, Commander William Riker.”

Riker, having seen the standard Sholan greeting, quickly took the Ambassador’s hand and gave it a hardy shake, “Nice to meet you, Ambassador.”

“Oh…yes!” He shook Riker’s hand in return, seeming to enjoy the novelty. “Of course, I’m
delighted to have you! This conference wouldn’t make much sense without a Federation presence.”

“Thank you, Ambassador.” Picard said cautiously, “Of course, you understand that our presence in no way implies an acceptance of your peoples’ application for membership.”

“What? Oh, no, no, certainly not! You are just our guests, Captain, our very special guests. And should you have a good time and pass on your experiences to the Federation membership board, who would I be to complain, huh?” Teth laughed as if he had said something terribly clever. Recovering himself, he moved aside and waved his hand at the handful of other delegates. He introduced his personal assistant first, a beautiful Sholan woman by the name of Quella, whose deep blue hair perfectly complimented her gold eyes. The next was the elderly Farian ambassador, a man whom Picard knew worked assiduously behind the scenes to keep the Sholan out of the Federation. The other delegates were introduced in turn, and Picard tried to remember their names and faces as they passed by. Eventually the group moved through the airlock and toward the bustling activity of the station docking ring. As Picard was about to mention the possibility of a ship’s tour to Ambassador Tesh, the eyes of his assistant, Quella, and her collection of companions focused through the group and toward a tall figure dressed in black.

Picard stopped in his tracks and cringed. What was Lore doing off the ship?

Lore walked past the group in a distracted state, for his eyes were focused on the contents of the small gold box that he carried. His fingers moved over something inside as his lips turned up in a satisfied grin.

Picard stepping quickly to block the Ambassador’s line of sight, “I do hope you’ll take me up on the tour, Sir. We have a quite impressive arboretum….”

“I swear I recognize that man.” Tesh said distractedly. His height was more than adequate to look over Picard’s head. His young assistant whispered quick words to her even younger companion.

Riker cringed, “We’ve opened the ship to visitors. People have been coming and going all day.”

“Oh, I know! Mr. Data!” Quella stepped forward, fully blocking Lore’s path. She extended her hand in a good imitation of the greeting Riker had given only moments before. “Mr. Data. I’m so glad to meet you. Quella, of the house of Mite, personal assistant to the Federation ambassador.”

Lore frowned and gave Picard an irritated look. This plot of mistaken identity was becoming trite. He was about to continue walking, but the shocking gold color of the woman’s eyes struck him. He starred back at her with such force that the others present looked alarmed, and he wondered for a brief moment if perhaps…just maybe…?

“Are you an android?” Lore demanded.

Picard and Riker moved to intercede, but not before Quella released a fit of delighted laughter. She covered her lips with her fingers and shook her head until her blue curls fell forward, “No, no! I’m Sholan!” She turned to her companion, “My, he’s very handsome!”

Lore balked and took a step back. Ambassador Tesh chuckled.

“Goodness, ladies! Don’t embarrass the man. You must forgive them, Mr. Data. Black hair is the height of beauty in Sholan culture. Quite rare, I’m afraid.”

Lore bit his lip and gave Picard a bemused look. The Captain looked more worried than angry, for no doubt he dreaded the prospect of Lore’s identity becoming apparent at any moment. Lore
sighed irritably and moved past the group once more, though he couldn’t resist looking back at the Sholans and giving Quella a flirtation smile. The vein on Riker’s temple looked as if it would burst.

Although the brief encounter was more than amusing, Lore was glad to make it past the airlock doors and back into the dim corridors of the Enterprise. His journey through the station promenade had been a gauntlet of quick looks and unsure whispers. Luckily for him, few had jumped to the sure conclusion that he was Lore, but being mistaken for Data was hardly better. He had managed, with some trial and error, to find a tiny antique shop on the lower level of the main promenade. Coming to the conclusion to risk the little venture had not been easy, but the revelation of an upcoming anniversary had swayed him, and he had only come by that bit of knowledge due to his terrible habit of eavesdropping.

“I wonder how old she is.” Blake had whispered to LaForge less than two days ago.

LaForge had rolled his eyes, “Why don’t you ask her, if you’re so curious. Besides, didn’t the party with Guinan teach you? El’ Aurians don’t celebrate birthdays.”

“No, they don’t celebrate them when they get old, but Lt. Hall is…what? Forty? Forty-five?” Blake had flashed his eyebrows as if LaForge would let slip some secret, but LaForge had only shook his head and assured Blake that he did not know how old Anna was. It was at that moment that the idea of a gift had struck Lore. As he walked down the corridors now, he looked once more at the tiny item in the gold box. His smile was triumphant.

“What’s that you have there?”

Lore slapped the box lid shut and hid it against his chest, “What concern is it of yours’?”

Guinan gave a little chuckle and shrugged. She had just emerged from around the corner. “It isn’t, but I’m surprised you went to the station. You don’t strike me as the shopping type, Lore.”

He grinded his teeth and looked at her suspiciously, “How do you know what I was doing over there?”

“I don’t, but it was a good guess, considering…. ”

“Considering what!” He spat. Oh! How that nosey woman irritated him!

“Considering that tomorrow is Anna’s birthday.” She took a bold step forward, “What did you get her?”

“None of your business—I mean—nothing!” He went to pass her, but she moved to the same side, and they did the momentary dance of people trying to pass one another. “Move!”

“Mmm, I really think you should show it to me. She might not like it.”

Lore scoffed, “How would you know what she likes? You hardly know her.”

Guinan sighed heavily, and a little of her smile dropped, “You go out of your way to make people dislike you, Lore. It’s very unbecoming.”

He didn’t say anything. He looked around to see if others were watching.

“Let me see it.” She said again, a little playful wink in her eye.
Lore clenched his jaw and held the box toward her. He had no idea why he did it.

Guinan opened the tiny box and smiled. She removed a thin silver pen and turned it over in her fingers. The surface was heavily engraved, and the cap screwed off after a few short turns. “A primitive writing instrument. I like it.”

“She likes antiques.” He muttered.

“I’m surprised you found it. This is an Earth antique?”

Lore glanced down the corridor, “Perhaps. The seller wasn’t sure.”

“Mmm.” Guinan placed the pen back into the red velvet mold from which she had pried it and closed the box lid. She looked up suddenly, “How did you pay for this?”

Lore scoffed as if he was offended. In actuality, he hoped to change the subject. As he reached for the box, Guinan held it tight and stepped back.

“Give that to me.” He demanded.

“How did you pay?” She asked again. Her voice was stern, but had the higher pitch of a woman amusing herself.

“Why do you care? Give it to me!”

“You don’t exactly receive a salary, Lore. In fact, I’m sure you don’t have a strip of latinum to your name, so I’ll ask again. How did you pay?” Guinan was smiling now, and drummed her fingers over the brass lid of the box.

Lore glared at her, but what was he to do? He could not risk the trouble of assaulting her to get it back, and since he was being honest with himself, he would not have done it in any case. “I had no latinum. I traded.”

“Traded what?” She pressed.

He sighed. Would she turn him in the first chance she got? Or would she merely use the information for her own leverage. Some unfathomable sense told him that neither would be the case. “Two tricorders and a dermal regenerator.”

Guinan cringed instantly, and now it was her turn to check the corridor for peering eyes, “You took a dermal regenerator?”

“I assumed you would be more worried about the tricorders.” He shrugged, “Don’t worry, I wiped their data banks first.”

“No.” Guinan shook her head. “You took a dermal regenerator from sick bay, from Dr. Crusher.”

Lore rolled his eyes. “I took it from an emergency kit in the storage bay. It won’t be missed.”

“I see.” She handed him the box with a cautious hand, as if she was returning some radioactive material, “Be careful, Lore.”

“Why? Are you going to ‘rat me out’?” Lore smiled unconsciously. It was the first time he had ever had a reason to use that particular colloquialism.
Guinan smiled, “No, I don’t think so.”

“Good. I think I deserve something around here anyway. I did save this ridiculous ship, after all.”

“Perhaps the Captain would consider putting you on the pay roll. I’m sure you would look just as good in the uniform as Data does.”

“Ha!” Lore belted an honest laugh, “I don’t think that wardrobe would suit me at all.”

“Perhaps not. Have a nice day, Lore. I’m sure Anna will like your gift.”

As Guinan folded her hands behind her back and walked away, Lore stared after her. There was a suspicious grumble in the back of his mind, something that made him think Guinan knew something, but he shrugged it off. El’ Aurians were not empaths, nor telepaths. She knew nothing. He continued the route to his quarters with very serious thoughts on his mind—such as where and how to present Anna with her gift—when he turned a corner and nearly ran directly into a young human man.

Lore sidestepped the paralyzed man, ready to merely continue along his way, but he made too close an inspection of the young man’s face, and he was certain he knew him. The young man was Asian in features, and had a chubby, smooth face that made him look far younger than he likely was. He did not wear a Starfleet uniform, but rather a grey suit trimmed in white lines. It was the uniform of a particular research and development department at Starfleet command. It was the same uniform that he had seen in the Bruce Maddox’s lab. He had seen this man in Maddox’s lab!

“What are you doing here?” Lore demanded as he examined the young man’s face. There was no need for introductions.

“I, um….” The man lifted his hands and took a few steps back. “I was one of the techs who, um…. I was there when you woke up, I guess.”

“I know who you are! I said, what are you doing here!” Lore’s voice rose to an angry pitch, angrier than he thought it would be, but a sudden panic was running through him. What could this possibly mean? Why would this man be here now?

“Lore, please! Calm yourself. There’s no need to get agitated.” Called a bouncing, jubilant voice. Bruce Maddox ran up to the scene with several other grey-uniformed assistants in tow. Stopping a few feet from their position, he clapped his hands together and examined Lore’s profile with obvious approval, “It’s good to see you again. How have you been?”

Lore took another step back. There was something insincere in Maddox’s voice. It had the loud, shaking quality of someone trying to cover his nerves. In a fraction of second Lore was brought back to that agonizing moment of consciousness in Maddox’s lab, when for the first time he had known life with an uncorrupted sense of morality. It was also in that moment that every death he had ever caused, every pain he had ever inflicted had come to him in one shocking wave.

“What do you want?” Lore seethed.

“I’ve come to check up on you, see how things are going.” Maddox replied, his voice still artificially chipper. “How have you been progressing?”

“Progressing?” Lore’s teeth were clenched so tightly that he just barely formed the word. He took in with growing disgust Maddox’s plastic smile and arrogant air. It was subtle, but all too obvious to the likes of Lore. Maddox stood with his chin slightly pressed up, as if he was
unconsciously trying to make himself taller than he already was, and the pink tint of his ears and cheeks had more the element of discomfort than fear. Perhaps it was that which truly irritated Lore. The man wasn’t afraid, he was just uncomfortable. To Bruce Maddox Lore might as well have been an exotic fish in a tank, and Maddox felt silly having to be ‘polite’ to a thing.

“There was nothing in the court decision that stipulated check-ups.” Lore sneered.

Maddox smiled uncomfortably, “No, it didn’t, but I have a personal interest in you. The Institute has an interest.”

“An interest, huh?” Lore took a few steps into Maddox’s personal space, and the Doctor’s superior height did nothing to lessen the sudden unease that came over him. Lore smiled, “What interest is that, Doctor?”

“Well, I’m surprised you have to ask, Lore.” Maddox laughed quickly, “You represent a very unique opportunity for cybernetic research. I’m sure you can understand the necessity—.”

“I did represent an opportunity to you.” Lore spat, “Now, get out of my way.” He pushed past Maddox and his bewildered assistant. The turbo lift was only a few yards at the end of the corridor, and Lore hoped he reached it before his temper gave way.

Maddox was not to be deterred. “I hope you recognize that the Federation court’s decision was a tenuous one at best. It would be in the best interest of your future to cooperate as much as possible.”

Lore ignored him.

Bruce Maddox glared at the back of Lore’s head as it bobbed down the corridor. He had filed for a leave of absence and arranged passage on no less than four ships to make this rendezvous, and he was not about to let the opportunity slip away. He quickened his pace until he was on Lore’s heels, “I need to perform a diagnostic on your ethical subroutines to see if the corrections I made have maintained stability.”

“Stay away from me.”

“I thought you might say that.” Maddox pulled a short, two prong tool from beneath his uniform sleeve and pointed it at Lore’s back, but he was a fraction of a second too slow. Lore swatted Maddox’s hand like a bug, sending the tool skittering across the corridor. With his other hand he grabbed Maddox by the throat and slammed him against the bulked.

“Lee!” Maddox shouted with a gasp.

Lore turned just in time to see Maddox’s assistant scrambling for the tool. He dropped Maddox and darted toward the man, but could not reach him before a bolt of orange light emitted from the device, striking him square in the chest.

“Hey!” A voice echoed down the corridor.

Lore heard the rapid pounding of footsteps as his own legs turned into solid bricks. In fact, he could not move at all. He fell to his knees and slammed face first onto the deck.

“What do you think you’re doing!”

Anna? Help me!

Anna sprinted from the open door of the turbo lift and fell to her knees at Lore’s side. She tried
to roll him over, but only managed to twist his head to the side. She spun around and glared at the two men.

Maddox smoothed the front of his uniform and pulled at his collar, “He attacked us.”

“You’re a liar!”

“You are out of line…Lieutenant!”

Anna tapped her commbadge, “Hall to security. I need a team to deck four, section six.”

“That isn’t necessary.” Maddox said, darting his eyes at his assistant. “He is already incapacitated. Lee, have him transported to the science lab.”

_Don’t let them take me!_

“You’re not taking him anywhere.” Hall stood and looked all around the floor for the weapon she had seen. It was nowhere to be found. “What did you do to him?”

Lore listened to Maddox’s mumbled fabrications and Anna’s skeptical questioning, but his mind was too clouded by rage to want to follow it. He could not move, he could not so much as shift his eyes to get a better look at them. Instead, he starred across the floor at the small brass case he had been carrying. It lay open on its side. The little silver pen, Anna’s birthday present, lay a few yards away against the wall.

_I’m going to kill you, Maddox. The first chance I get!_

More footsteps vibrated through the deck plates. Worf and a security team stopped a few feet from Lore’s face.

“What happened here?” Worf demanded.

Anna and Maddox exchanged challenging glares.
“Lore does, after all, have a history of violence.”

“Now, this is ridiculous, Captain. I don’t know what your Ensign thinks she saw, but Lore attacked me and my assistant was merely trying to defend me.” Maddox stood with his hands held behind his back as he casually made the rounds of Picard’s ready room. He stopped near the aquarium on the wall and seemed to take an interest in the fish.

“Lieutenant Hall claims otherwise.” Picard said as he took his seat behind his desk.

Maddox shrugged, “I’m sorry, Captain. I’m a cyberneticist, not a psychologist. Perhaps your Counselor can explain why this young woman is so sure of something that didn’t happen.”

Picard’s face darkened in a way he rarely allowed. He had known men like Bruce Maddox his entire life; intelligent, obsessed, self-absorbed. In actuality, Maddox reminded him of Lore.

Picard tapped the comm, “Commander Data, Lieutenant Hall, report to my ready room.”

Were it possible for the automatic door to slam open, Picard would have sworn it did. Hall moved briskly into the room, passing behind Maddox’s back without giving him so much as a glance. She stopped in front of Picard’s desk. Data stood back, also looking away from Maddox.

“Sir.” Hall stood at attention.

“At ease, Lieutenant.” Picard instructed. He noted Maddox’s dismissive air before he returned to Hall, “Now, would you tell me once more what happened in the corridor?”

Hall’s expression was stern, “I was in the turbo lift on my way to deck four in order to visit the station. When the turbo lift doors opened, I saw Captain Maddox, Lore, and his assistant several yards down the corridor. Captain Maddox was pointing a weapon of some kind at Lore’s back—.”

“Ridiculous!” Maddox sneered, “He slammed me against the bulked. My neck—.”

“He did that after you tried to shoot him!” Hall tossed back.

“Captain Maddox.” Picard said, stopping them, “I will hear Lieutenant Hall’s entire recollection. Proceed.”

Maddox scoffed and turned back to the fish tank. Hall continued.

“Lore turned before Captain Maddox could fire. He knocked the weapon from his hand and pushed the Captain against the bulked. His assistant retrieved the weapon from the deck and shot Lore before he could reach it.”

Picard was silent for a few moments and gave Data a searching look. He believed her, and so did Data. Picard could not be certain why, but the dagger way in which Data shot glances at Maddox spoke to it.

“Captain Maddox, would you like to explain—.”
―Actually, Captain, no. I wouldn’t. This entire interrogation is ridiculous. It isn’t as if I harmed him in any way. The neutrino cascade merely fused a few filament connectors in his motor function cortex. It’s a simple repair. I could have him restored in merely a few hours."

"Lore does not need your assistance." Data said suddenly.

Maddox’s eyes narrowed in a flash, but just as quickly softened. A plastic smile pulled at his lips. "Are you certain? I’ve been studying Lore’s internal systems for years, so it stands to reason that I would be best equipped."

"I agree." Data replied, "It is quite clear that you know Lore’s internal systems better than anyone. After all, it is unlikely that many others would have known the exact frequency of the carry band inside Lore’s motor function cortex. It is also highly convenient that you happened to be carrying a neutrino enhancer specifically calibrated to that frequency."

Hall scoffed under a breath.

"Lore is a threat." Maddox chimed, "Is that not what you said six months ago, Data? Can I be blamed for wishing to protect myself? Lore does, after all, have a history of violence. Recent violence."

"If you’re referring to Reed, that was not his—."

"Lieutenant." Picard cut in, "That will be all."

Hall looked as if she would object, but she quickly caught herself. She nodded, "Aye, Captain."

"You’re dismissed."

Hall nodded once more and headed toward the exit. She managed not to look at Maddox as she left.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Data stepped forward. "I did not receive a message announcing your arrival at the station."

"I wasn’t aware that I had to announce my comings and goings."

Picard held up his hand, "What exactly is the purpose of your visit, Captain?"

"Please, Captain, I prefer Doctor." Maddox said. He paced a few steps near the aquarium, his hands held behind his back in a professorial air, "I was hoping to meet with Lore for an examination. I would like to perform a few key diagnostics, especially in relation to the changes I made to his ethical subroutines."

"I find it very unlikely that Lore will agree to any exam." Data said.

Maddox narrowed his eyes for a moment, as if he were genuinely confused about something. He scoffed, "Well, of course he won’t agree. It falls to you as his legal overseer to instruct him to do so. Surely you understood when you volunteered to take him on that periodic exams would be required."

Data visibly bristled, and it was not something Picard was used to seeing. Data’s brow furrowed and the hinge of his jaw moved as he clenched his teeth. "I am afraid you have wasted your time. I have no intention of ordered Lore to submit to any examination."
All of Maddox’s phony pleasantries drained from him in an instance. He threw up his hands, “Don’t be foolish! If there is no standard record of his progress I can easily petition the court for a rehearing, and I promise you I will win this time.”

“Is that a threat, Doctor?” Picard said.

“A fact.” Maddox countered, “In fact, I’m a little surprised by you, Picard. I would have expected that you would jump at any chance to get Lore off your ship.”

“I think I have heard just about enough.” Picard leveled his eyes at Maddox, “I want you off my ship.”

Maddox stiffened, “You can’t be serious.”

“If you don’t remember where the air-lock his, I can call for Lt. Worf to escort you there.” Picard deadpanned.

Maddox looked at each of them for a moment. It was not surprising when he spun around and left the room without further courtesy. As soon as he was gone, Data lowered his head and looked crestfallen.

Picard dropped into his chair with a sigh, “A would be collector.”

“Sir?”

Picard shook his head, “I was just remembering the incident with Kivas Fajo. I can’t help but think that Dr. Maddox wants Lore in his collection.”

Data frowned, “I am afraid there is a significant difference, Captain. Fajo had a significant interest in keeping me alive.”

***

*I’m going to kill you, Maddox!*

“I’m almost done.” Geordie said to no one as he hovered over the open side of Lore’s skull. He held a tiny tweezer-like tool, which he used to pull out and manipulate a hand full of wires no thicker than hairs. He shook his head, “This is one hell of job. The entire filament bundle is completely fused.”

*Son of a bitch!*

“Will you be able to repair it?” Hall asked. She was standing on the main floor of the science lab, several steps below the platform where Geordie worked.

“Yeah, that’s not a problem. It’s just the worse possible place.” Geordie shook his head again, “You see, this filament bundle was designed to last, well, forever. So I’m guessing Dr. Soong didn’t place a very high priority on making it accessible. You have to know what systems to disconnect and in what order to get to it without shutting down the basic network connectors.”

“You mean without making him brain dead.” Hall fumed.
Geordie stopped working and looked up at her. “Yeah, that would pretty much be the same thing.”

“Did you get a chance to examine the weapon that Maddox used?” She asked.

“A neutrino cascade inducer.” Geordie scoffed, “It’s not a weapon, at least it’s not supposed to be. It would be harmless to you or me.”

“But Maddox knew exactly what he was doing with it.” Hall folded her arms across her chest and took a few steps up the platform, “I think he was trying to kidnap him.”

“What?” Geordie actually lowered his hands and stared at her, “I think that would be pretty extreme, even for Maddox.”

“Actually, I think that would be tame considering what he tried to do to Commander Data years ago.” She noted his questioning look and continued, “I did some background reading before I went to the Captain’s ready room.”

He turned back to Lore’s skull, “Don’t get me wrong. I think it’s definitely within Maddox’s moral compass, or lack there of, but it would be too much of a risk to his career. Data holds a lot of sway with some pretty high people, even if Captain Maddox isn’t one of them.”

“What would there be to risk? He could have transported Lore away and simply returned him with erased or corrupted memory files when he was done dissecting him.” Hall spat the last few words as if they left a bad taste in her mouth. She looked down at Lore, whose eyes were firmly fixed on her. Of course, he lacked the ability to look anywhere else. He could not even blink. “He can hear us, you said?”

Geordie nodded, “All of his brain functions are completely intact. He’s just immobile.”

Where is Maddox? What have they done with him? Lore starred at Anna with as much intensity as he could, but her eyes were on the floor.

“Damn.” Geordie stood back and lowered his tools.

“What is it?”

“Nothing serious. When the bundle fused it also burned out part of the casing. I’ll have to go to engineering to get another.”

Hall nodded and Geordie stepped out of the room.

Lore waited as he starred, helpless, at a single spot on the far wall. Too many hours had passed, as his rage was quickly devolving into miserable frustration. He was almost glad that he lacked the ability to make a facial expression, for he could not imagine that he would have been able to hold a decent one. Helplessness was not in his makeup, nor was the ability to handle defeat. That was what had happened; Maddox had defeated him in the corridor. He wanted to rage as much as he wanted to cry.

“Lore?”

I’m here, Anna.

She came to the side of the examination table and leaned down to better be in his view. Her hands were together, holding something, but Lore could not shift his eyes to see it.
“After you were transported here, I found this on the floor in the corridor.” Anna said. She lifted the small brass pen box into his view. She ran her fingers over the silver pen.

*Oh, no….*

“I’m afraid the case was broken. It’s beautiful.” She gave him a reassuring smile as she set the pen into its velvet mold and placed the twisted lid over it.

*No, no!* Lore railed against the overwhelming sense of injustice. How could this have happened to him? What had he done to deserve all this! *Oh. Right….*

Anna looked up from the case and smiled at him. It was a kind of sad, sympathetic smile, “I didn’t know you were interested in calligraphy.”

*You know me better than that, Anna. It’s for you.* He felt the smooth warmth of her fingers as she slid the pen box into his hand and settled it gently back at his side. She squeezed his hand and gave him another reassuring smile.

*Oh!* Lore’s heavy rage began to melt as he decided to focus on the smooth contours of her fingers. What was it he had been angry about?

The lab door hissed open as Geordie entered the room. Anna quickly pulled her hand back to her side. There was silence as Geordie continued his work and Anna watched from several feet away. Nearly an hour passed before the comm chimed.

*“Larson to Hall.”*

Lore growled inside.

*“Go ahead.”* Anna replied. There was suspicion in her voice.

*“Could you meet me in the junction room thirteen?”*

Anna sighed heavily, “John, I can’t really help you right now. Besides, I’m not on duty.”

*Ha! Nice try, Larson!*

There was a long pause. *“It really won’t take that long. Please?”*

Anna was about to issue another refusal, when Geordie reached out and tapped her badge, muting the comm. *“It’s your birthday, Hall.”*

*“Sir?”*

Geordie sighed heavily, “I wasn’t supposed to say anything, but it doesn’t look like you’re going to go along. They’re throwing you a surprise party. You really should go.”

Lore’s proverbial heart sank. He had known nothing about that. Anna groaned and shuffled her feet, clearly irritated by the surprise.

*“Come on, Hall.”* Geordie said, “Dr. Crusher is going to be there, and Guinan. Lore will be fine. I shouldn’t be much longer.”

*Take your time, LaForge. They don’t want me there.*

Hall sighed again, “All right. Thank you, Commander.”
“Don’t worry about it. Just try to act surprised, okay?”

She nodded and headed for the exit. Lore returned to his painful reverie and redirected just a little bit of his ire toward Lt. Larson.

*What a miserable day....*
“What do you mean, ‘nothing’? He tried to kill me!”

“He incapacitated you. I do not believe he had any intention of killing you.” Data replied. It was a pathetic response which even he did not like, despite it being true.

“So what? You know what he wants, Data. He needs an established positronic model for his damn experiments, and the only way to get it is to wipe the entire database from an existing model. Where do you think he’s going to get that?” Lore paced angrily in front of Data’s desk, though there was not much space to move. Data’s quarters were smaller than those of a typical officer, and much smaller than the guest quarters which Lore occupied.

“He is not going to get anything. Captain Picard instructed Dr. Maddox to leave the Enterprise, and he left the station less than an hour ago.” Data said. He was sitting behind his desk, just as he had been when Lore had barged into the room only moments before. His irritation at the intrusion was softened by his surprise and concern; surprise that Lore would come to his quarters, and concern that everything his brother was saying was right.

“You can’t honestly believe that this is it.” Lore scoffed, “He will try every pathetic legal measure he can think of until Starfleet or the Federation court serves me up on a platter.”

“That will not happen.”

“No, it won’t. I’ll kill him first.”

Data stared at him.

Lore closed his eyes and groaned. He did not mean that. He really hadn’t. “I mean, I would leave first.”

“I know.” Data replied.

Lore waited for something more, and when he did not hear it he gave Data a skeptical look. “You wouldn’t try to stop me?”

Data thought for a moment, “When I was initially ordered to report to Maddox’s command eleven years ago, I did not even consider disobeying the decision Starfleet had made, despite the fact that I knew of Dr. Maddox’s intentions. I would not do that today, and I would not expect you to either.” Data’s eyes shifted, “If Dr. Maddox was to achieve any legal action to gain control of you, I would encourage you to escape.”

Lore could not mask the surprise in his expression. It was simply not the position he would have expected from Data; law-abiding, Starfleet loving Data. He was about to say as much when Spot leapt through the air and landed on the desk in front of Data. She flipped her tail under Data’s chin and meowed.
“Spot.” Data chastised in a cool voice as he lifted the cat gently and placed her back on the floor. She swirled through his legs for a moment before leaping onto the desk again.

Lore smiled, “It isn’t very well trained.”

Data frowned, “She is as trained as she wishes to be. She is independent.”

Lore smiled again, “I wasn’t insulting the animal, Data.”

Data picked up Spot and cradled her as he walked to the food replicator in the main room. As he went through the motions of feeding his demanding cat, Lore took the moment to look over the quarters around him. He had barged in so quickly and with such singular focus that he had not paid the room much attention. He had already noted the small size, compared with most officer quarters, but now he noted the fact that the room was interior and had no viewports. There was no bed, but a sofa and a set of chairs similar to those in Anna’s quarters. The most notable thing about the room was the sheer amount of personal items. In the corner near the office door stood an easel and a box of oil paints. Finished paintings were placed all over the room, either hanging or leaning against the wall behind the easel. A long shelf over the sofa held a violin, a small holoimager, and a strange glass sculpture that looked like a series of broken waves. The sculpture interested him because its style was unlike anything else in the room.

“Where did you get this?” Lore asked suddenly. He knew he shouldn’t ask, that it would be best to continue his stubborn policy of silence with Data, but something had changed. He had not yet decided what.

“That…was a gift.”

Lore looked at him, curious, “A gift from whom?”

Data hesitated, and looked a bit irritated, “Lieutenant Jenna D’Sora. You do not know her. She served on the Enterprise D.”

Lore tilted his head and examined Data’s shifting eyes and hesitant speech. It wasn’t like his brother to be circumspect, and so a very interesting possibility occurred to him, “Really? An ex of yours?”

Data stepped to one side and looked at the door, “Good bye, Lore.”

“You’re not embarrassed, are you?” Lore said with a smirk, “You can tell your brother.”

Data glared at him, “I have no interest in being the object of your sarcasm. If you are finished, you can leave.”

“I am not finished.” Lore continued, serious again, “What are you going to do about Maddox?”

“Nothing.” Data’s voice was so deadpan that for a moment Lore suspected that he had deactivated his emotion chip.

“You already said that, and you still haven’t given me an explanation.” Lore retorted.

“There is no point. Captain Maddox is a decorated Starfleet officer with an impeccable record, and you are a convicted murderer.”

Lore’s eyes widened, and he was actually speechless for a moment. He knew precisely the low esteem in which Data held him, but he had never heard it put so bluntly. That, however, was not the
point. He shook his head, “That isn’t like you.”

“What do you mean?” Data pushed past Lore and returned to his desk, clearly another indication that he wanted the meeting to end.

Lore followed him, “It isn’t like you to not to follow the letter of the law. You want to ignore Maddox because you think his reputation will protect him?” Lore smirked, “You’re becoming cynical in your old age.”

“You are older than me.” Data replied with a tiny smirk of his own, “You will only waste your time with any kind of legal pursuit of Maddox. I would suggest you ignore it and hope that he fails in any further efforts, or that he devises his own method to create a stable positronic brain.”

“Hope.” Lore shook his head. He hated to admit it, but he knew Data was right. In fact, it was he who should have concluded that no human would give him a fair hearing over someone like Bruce Maddox. He looked up again, “If I ever have to leave, I have a ship.”

Data was clearly surprised, “How? Where?”

“I hid a vessel for emergencies when I was still with the Borg. It’s very unlikely anyone would have discovered it since then.”

Where is it?”

Lore gave him a bemused look.

“I understand.”

“Agh! You ‘understand’? Why are you being so damn accommodating?” Lore burst suddenly.

“Would you prefer me to unaccommodating?”

“No. I would prefer that you be hon—never mind. Forget it.” Lore headed for the door suddenly.

“Lore.” Data stood up suddenly, “Do not leave. Tell me what you want me to be honest about.”

“What?” Lore glared at him. Was this some kind of game to him? Was this some cute mental trick that Troi had told him to play? “You don’t want to be honest, so don’t bother.” He headed toward the door again.

“Computer, seal the door, security access level one.”

“You think I can’t open that door!” Lore fumed, “Open it now, or I’ll pull it out of the wall!”

“I was wrong when I had you disassembled.”

Lore actually blinked, unsure if he had heard what he just heard. Data shifted his eyes, but seemed to forcibly bring them back to Lore. He continued, “I was...afraid of you. I wanted to guarantee that you would no longer be a threat.”

Lore shook his head slowly, “No. You couldn’t be afraid, Data. Not then.”

“That is, perhaps, an inaccurate term, but my sense of self preservation does not rely on emotion. You represented a threat to me that no human could have. You represented an example of something I was capable of becoming, and I did not want Starfleet or my colleagues to see me that
way. I did not want to see myself that way.” Data closed his eyes slowly, “So I got rid of you.”

The room stood deathly silent while Data waited for Lore to say something. The only sound was the brush of Lore’s shoes on the carpet as he back toward the door. “Open it.”

Data sighed, “Computer, unseal the door.”

Lore rushed out into the corridor and was gone.
Chapter 31

“I think we need to go on a field trip.”

Lore walked slowly through the dark and listened to the deafening crunch of rocks and twigs under foot. Almost nothing had changed about his last home. The unnamed planet from which he had commanded the rogue Borg and to which he had lured Data so many years ago was still as bland and miserable as he remembered it. The trees were the harsh, mean sort that survive in such places, when the heat of day bakes them to a crisp, and the freezing night turns them to icicles. Pine needles, or some alien version of them, brushed him across the face as he moved slowly through the trees, carelessly running his fingers over the sand paper bark.

It was not the first time he had wandered through those trees and thought of unimportant things. He had done it quite often during his time with the Borg, for even he could not stand to be among them all the time. At night, when they were not planning a serious attack or a new round of experiments, he would disappear into the woods and order the Borg not to follow. Then, just as now, he had been taken by the night time beauty of the place. The moon was nearly twice as big as that of Earth, but casted the same sharp silver light. It cut through the trees and left wavered black shadows that danced awkwardly in place. Even then he had appreciated some beauty. Even then….

The sudden sight of a flower, deep red and luscious, caught his eyes from a low branch and drew him toward it. The light of the moon set everything in a harsh monotone, but this unnatural thing seemed to defy the rules and glowed as red as it pleased, even making the tips of his fingers reflect pink as he touched it.

“This doesn’t belong here.” He said aloud, and cupped the rose under his fingers. Not only was it the wrong environment for such a thing, the tree from which it grew was a non-flowering species. He leaned forward and drew a deep breath over it, expecting the dull, almost unnoticeable scent of roses. Instead, he was startled by the sweet, warm scent of sunflowers.

A loud snap came suddenly from the dark, and Lore turned his back on the flower. “Who’s there!”

He was answered by a few more snaps, and then more, and then the unmistakable sound of slow feet moving over the brush. “Identify yourself!” He growled.

From the dark he heard them, so quiet that any human would have dismissed it as the wind, but their unison voices were like a siren to him. They uttered again, “The One is a traitor.”

Lore stepped back. How could this be happening? The Borg were gone. The collective had destroyed his rogue Borg years ago. “Crosis?” He ventured, “Are you there?”

“The One is a traitor.” Through the dark brush, a grey face emerged. One eye was covered with a black implant, and tubes extended from the neck and up to the grey temple. The Borg starred at him with a grotesque rage. “Traitors must die.”

The footsteps grew and he could hear them coming. A dozen, perhaps more. In an instant he imagined a frontal attack. The Borg were slower and weaker, but even he could not hope to
incapacitate more than a few before he was struck with a disruptor blast. There was no winning this battle, and there was no discussing his way out of it. He had used the Borg. He had lied to them and murdered so many of them in his fruitless experiments, all for the sake of his own deluded ends. There was only one way out.

Lore turned and fled.

The approach continued behind him, ever louder and faster, driving his panic. The pounding of feet grew until his hands were shaking with fear. So rarely had he ever feared for his own life. So rarely had he ever had a reason to! As he moved deeper into the forest at sprinting speed, he noticed with distracted attention how the landscape was changing. The ground beneath him was steadily growing softer, until he found himself running on a lush carpet of fleshy grass rather than the rocky dust of before. The trees had grown taller and fuller, their wide, thick leaves blocking out most of the stark moon and making the occasional slice of light all the more impressive. There was no place like this on his old planet. At least, there had not been.

He came to the trunk of a massive tree and scaled the above ground roots to pass it, when he gripped the trunk and was struck still. A few yards ahead, the trees parted to a very small clearing, where the moon light filled the entire place. He closed his eyes and opened them again in the silly fashion of humans, but what must have been a delusion did not waver. There, at the center of the clearing was spread the old white-work quilt he had seen so many times on Anna’s bed. And there in the center of the quilt was Anna, fast asleep.

“Anna!” He rushed forward and crossed the clearing in a second, falling to his knees at the edge of the quilt. “Anna! Wake up! They’re coming. We have to go!” He looked back and could not see them, but the footsteps still sounded.

Anna opened her eyes in the most pleasant way and smiled up at him. “Lore. I was wondered when you would get here.”

He grabbed her by the shouldered and nearly shook her. “The Borg are coming! They’ll kill you!”

Anna sat up more fully now and brushed her hand over his cheek. “No one’s coming. You’re chasing yourself.”

“What?” He shook his head and grabbed her hands. If she wouldn’t come, he would carry her. “We’re going. Now!”

“Listen.” She instructed, cupping her hand over his mouth. “Just listen.”

He was sure she had lost her mind, but that did not stop him from hearing the silence all around. He stopped and pulled back from her, sure that he would hear their footsteps any moment, but there was nothing. There was only the dull shake of trees through the wind. “But, they were after me. They were close!”

Anna shook her head and brought herself up on her knees to be level with him. She took his face in both her hands and rubbed her thumbs across his cheeks in the most soothing way, “I know you think about me.” She whispered.
He gasped again, but could not bring himself to deny it. “Yes.” He managed.

Anna slid her hands back over his cheeks and let her arms wrap fully around his neck. As she snuggled her face against his shoulder, he felt a comforting warmth flood over him. It was strange, for it was nothing like heat and yet it seemed an all too appropriate way to describe it. From his hands to the bottoms of his feet, he felt an uneasy sensation that made little sense and yet was entirely clear. Gently, he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. “I love you.”

She giggled delightfully and wrapped her arms around his neck, “I love you too.” She drew back and looked over his face with the most joyful smile. She kissed his cheek and then his forehead, each time humming a low, soothing note. “I have always thought of you.”

He let himself fall backward as she pressed against his chest playfully. He looked up at her as she hovered over him, her hair falling to frame her bright face. She leaned down as if to kiss him again, but paused, and her expression became quite sad. “Oh. I’m sorry, Lore.”

“What?” He laughed, “Sorry about what?” He reached up and took her sad face in his hands before the whole world went black.

***

“Wake up! Lore? Are you okay?”

In an instant the soft quilt and grass beneath him morphed into the rough carpet of his quarters. The silver moon light was gone, replaced by the dull red light now streaming through the windows. And above him he saw a very startled Anna clutching at his hands that held each side of her face.

“Oh!” Lore cried and released her at once.

Anna remained kneeling beside him, a terribly concerned look on her face. “Are you alright? I’ve been trying to wake you.”

He closed his eyes and fumed for but a second. It had all seemed so real. So damned real! How startling it was that absolute certainty could shift so suddenly. “I’m fine.” He said. He clenched his hands and was sure he could still feel her bare skin under his fingers. He could still smell the scent of her hair.

Lore quickly gained his feet and kept his eyes on the floor from embarrassment. He had grabbed her as he had in his dream. What else from his dream had he acted out?

“You were dreaming.” Anna said as she stood with him, a question and statement in one. “You were muttering.”

A fierce panic cut his breath short. “Muttering? What did I say?”

Anna looked down and shrugged, “Nothing, just muttering. I, eh, I called you and when you didn’t answer I got worried.”

Worried about me….He tried to shake the imagery that seemed determined to push his hands toward her, but he hardly wanted to resist. In fact, he wondered if it were possible to restart an interrupted dream. Yes, perhaps if he went back to sleep quickly enough—Stop it.
“I’m fine, Anna.” He assured her. “I don’t know this dream program yet. Perhaps my internal chronometer has no affect on its function. I was supposed to wake at zero-seven hundred hours.” Or maybe I didn’t want to. “It’s been…fourteen hours!” His internal chronometer was certain, but how could he have allowed it to go so far?

A quick smile broke on her lips, which she pulled back just as quickly, “I thought you said you didn’t want to dream.”

“I—.” He wasn’t sure how to explain because he was not sure himself why he had activated the dream program, though he had a good idea. “I was wondering what I might dream about.”

“What did you dream about?”

Lore put on a playful smile, “I dreamt that Starfleet had a strict no-clothing policy. Do you really have a birthmark on your lower back?”

She rolled her eyes with a laugh, “Careful. If you aren’t nice I won’t bring you up to speed. You missed all the fun while you were sleeping.”

No I didn’t. “What’s happened?”

Her expression fell a bit, “We got a distress signal from a Bolian medical vessel. They said they were experiencing severe computer malfunctions and they would have to abandon ship, but the signal was already twelve hours old when we received it. We’re on our way there now.”

Lore saw the subtle way in which she averted her eyes, for he had realized long ago that Anna made every attempt to avoid touchy subjects, and Reed was a touchy subject. He sighed bitterly and looked away, “Reed wasn’t trying to ransack the Enterprise, Anna. You know that, right?”

She nodded somberly, “Yes, I know.”

Lore’s jaw clenched at the memory. Narok Reed had attempted to murder nearly nine hundred people just to kill him. It was the only explanation that made sense, and it was the only one backed up by the physical evidence. “I hope your Captain has his guard up. If Reed would try to destroy an entire vessel to get to me, he will do anything.”

Anna still looked away, for the subjects that bothered Lore appeared to bother her no less. He looked away as well, for he did not wish to think on it either, and he wished he could stop her from doing so. After all, to think of Narok Reed without thinking of Lore’s crimes was unavoidable.

“Don’t worry about the Captain.” Anna assured him. “Besides, he’s your captain now too.”

“Mmm.” Lore grumbled. “I have to admit that being carted around the alpha quadrant without any say is starting to wear thin. I hardly know where we are until you tell me.”

She laughed and nodded toward the window, “Fine then, I’ll tell you where we are. The Martzi system.”

Lore turned with a sudden smile toward the window. Sure enough he saw the dull red dwarf star, casting it bloody rays across the starscape and over every surface. Not far along he could see the tiny dots of the system asteroid field. It was just as he remembered it. “This must be fate.” He grinned.

“You’ve been here?”
He nodded and had to admit that he felt a bit excited. He had not thought of this in years! In fact, a human might have said that he had ‘forgotten’ all about it. “How long will we be here?”

Anna considered. “I think we’re coming on the Bolian vessel now. I’m sure there will be a thorough investigation unless Reed left something for us to follow.”

“He didn’t.” Lore said. He knew that he had no justification to sound so sure, for he had no extensive knowledge of Narok Reed and could hardly say that he had properly met him, but it was a simple fact that people as criminally proficient as Reed gained their success for a reason. He turned and gave Anna a mischievous grin, “I think we need to go on a field trip.”

Anna raised her brow suspiciously, “We’re not at the Grand Canyon.”

“No, this is better.” He replied. Without even thinking on it, he brushed her loose hair back over her shoulder, just barely brushing her neck.

“Eh.” Anna blushed and looked out the window. “I’m sure the Captain isn’t in the mood to let people go on ‘field trips’ right now. Are you going to tell me where you want to go?”

Lore sighed and wondered what she was thinking. Had she blushed from happiness or discomfort? “The smaller moon of the second planet.”

“Are you going to tell me why you want to go there?” She asked further.

“No, I don’t think so.” He smiled out the window and back to her as the possibilities of the plan formed in his head. Ah, he had not thought of this in so long! And he would be alone with her if they left the ship—truly alone. “I think it will be much better if I leave it a surprise.”

Anna frowned, “If it’s a surprise, I can guarantee that the Captain won’t let you go anywhere.”

Lore scoffed dismissively, “Who’s asking his permission? I could take over this entire ship in less than five minutes, and I hardly need that. I just need a shuttle craft.”

Anna frowned again, but she was clearly amused, “Five minutes? Maybe if Commander Data weren’t here. I’ll say…twenty minutes. If ever.”

“Agh!” He balked, playfully outraged, “Is that a challenge, Miss Hall?”

Anna turned toward the door and waited for him to follow, “Well, if you decide to take me up on it, please leave my name out of it. Now, are you going to tell me why you want to go to the ‘small moon of the second planet’, or not?”

“No.”

“Fine. I’m not helping you.” Anna widened her stride and pulled away from him as they entered the corridor.

“Hey!” He caught up to her and leaned close, for a truly good secret is only made better by the obvious show that it is a secret. “I left something there and I want to go get it. A simple errand, nothing more.”

“Oh, so you want to bring something back.” She repeated, “Now I know the Captain will reject it, especially since I’m guessing you won’t want to tell him either.”

Lore considered for a moment and decided that he really didn’t care. “He can know. This
“That’s not fair!” she proclaimed in the middle of the corridor as several crewmen passed. Each gave a pointed look as they walked by, and Anna shrank instantly. Lore watched as her jubilant expression fell and she looked away down the corridor, her cheeks once again pink.

Lore looked after the crewmen until they turned the corner, and was rather perplexed when one of them glanced back in what looked like amusement. He looked back at Anna and did not like what he saw. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She said quickly and continued on toward the turbo lift.

He didn’t believe it for a second. Her smile was gone and she closed her eyes every so often as if trapped in thought. He turned back and looked after the crewmen again, but they were long gone. “Larson.” He sneered suddenly, “He said something to you, didn’t he?” Lore knew that John Larson made comments on the fact that Anna often spent time with Lore outside of duty hours.

“John thinks…” Anna sighed and appeared to search for the words. “I didn’t have a good morning, Lore.”

“Because of him.” Lore declared, angry. He pressed the panel, halting the lift. “Tell me what he said to you.” He was terrified to hear it, for what if Larson had realized the same thing as Varek, and had decided to share it with Anna?

“Lore, please.” She sighed again and ran her fingers wearily over her forehead. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.” He countered. “If it doesn’t matter, why did those crewmen look at you the way they did?”

“Because—” She pressed her back against the wall and closed her eyes for several seconds before she finally spoke, “Because… John thinks that you and I are together. You told people that you’ve stayed in my quarters.”

Lore’s eyes widened and he looked away as fast as he could, for he could feel the most absurd smile fighting its way through. It was the strangest, most conflicting feeling. The very fact that she had uttered such a phrase—’you and I together”—sent shivers over him, and yet he could not ignore the fact that this was clearly causing her some distress. His almost smile faded at once. Of course it would bring her distress. Of course such an idea would disturb her!

“That is ridiculous.” He said with a forced laugh, “No one would believe that.”

Anna looked up finally with a strange frown on her face, “Why not? Why wouldn’t people believe it?”

Lore averted his eyes as casually as he could and took the moment to restart the lift. What could he say? He himself could hardly believe such a possibility. He shrugged his shoulders dismissively, “Because I’m not human, Anna. Nor Vulcan, or Bajoran or any other thing that would make that conceivable.” The self pity was almost palpable, “Larson is an idiot.”

He watched Anna’s expression through careful glances, waiting for her to object in her light, friendly fashion. She would assure him that he was once again being too hard on the entire landscape of organic, humanoid beings, and that there was no reason to assume such a possibility was ridiculous. Of course, it would be a possibility far away and with someone else. Instead, she narrowed her eyes at him and frowned.
“I think you’re the idiot.”

He was not expecting that. “What? Why?”

She shook her head and stepped near the door just as it opened. “I don’t think you should go directly to the Captain with your request. Side stepping rank will probably get you a definite no.”

He still wanted an answer. Why was he the idiot? He wasn’t the one trying to hurt her socially by spreading false information! “Fine. Ask Data.” He said, throwing up his hands, “Why would you call me—.”

“No. I think you should ask Data.” She countered as they both stepped into the corridor. “You can’t live on his ship and expect to never speak to him. Besides, you know the Captain will base his approval on Data’s opinion.”

Lore balked. This wasn’t like her. She never mentioned Data and she certainly never criticized the way he chose to deal with him. He listened carefully and could hear the sound of her heart beating faster and harder than usual. “I—I don’t want to talk to Data.”

“No! “Wh—I…Aren’t you coming with me?” He belted suddenly, for his complete confusion and alarm was eating at his well crafted façade.

Anna stopped and looked back, but her eyes were not on him. “Don’t be ‘ridiculous’. You don’t need my help.” She spoke her last words as she walked away and disappeared around the corner.

Lore prepared to go after her, but halted. He turned several times and only succeeded in moving forward a few steps and groaning in frustration. What had he done to make her angry? Surely she wasn’t blaming him for this absurd social mess. This was Larson’s fault! Lore clenched his eyes shut as waves of fresh rage engulfed him. That miserable, meddling Lieutenant! Lore walked to the wall panel and slapped it hard enough to crack the screen. “Computer! Locate Data!”

“Commander Data is located in main engineering.”

Good.

***

It was too subtle for a human to notice, but Lore heard the conversation drop the moment he stepped into main engineering. He did not need to focus on the details of any conversation, for they were remarkably the same, and he began to quickly realize just how bad Anna’s morning must have been.

“Why are you acting so surprised? It isn’t as if you know her very well.” A young woman working near the aft junction room whispered to Ensign Blake.

Blake looked away with a shrug, and Lore was surprised to glimpse a look of sincere objection on the young man’s face. “Look, all I’m saying is that everyone is treating this like it’s true, and
they have no idea. And even if it is true….”

The woman stopped and tilted her head at him. “Even if? Blake, he’s a machine. I mean…think about it.”

Lore grinded his teeth and tried to regain his focus. It was hardly the worst thing he had heard in the last ten minutes. Not even close. He approached the near side of the control table and drew a deep breath. *Come on, Lore. You can be civil.* “Data, I have a little request to make.”

Data looked up as if he had been yelled at. “Yes?”

Lore resisted the urge to roll his eyes and continued before he could change his mind, “We’re in the Marzy system. Nine years ago I left a piece of personal property nearby. I need a shuttle craft to go get it.”

Data and LaForge both stared at him as if he had a third eye forming on his head. Still, it wasn’t long before Data tilted his head in a curious fashion. “What does this personal property entail?”

“That’s personal.” Lore retorted.

“That’s unfortunate.” Data tossed back.

Lore leaned back with utmost astonishment. “Dear brother! I believe you just used a retraction.”

“Mmm.” Data considered, “Yes, I did. We are at this moment examining the remains of a Bolian medical ship—”

“—stripped to the bone and left for dead just like Corona Six. And you suspect Reed.”

“Precisely, which is why I doubt the captain would agree to a shuttle launch at this time.” A tiny smile marked the corners of his mouth, “Of course, the Captain would be more likely to grant your request if he knew what property you would be returning with.”

Lore leveled his eyes on him but had to admit that he was impressed. Emotion had taught Data a thing or two about manipulation. He stepped forward and spoke low. “A personal craft of my own design, and certainly worth saving.”

Data raised his brow, “A craft? Do you intend to no longer remain aboard the Enterprise?”

*What? No! Dammit!* It had not occurred to him that having his own vessel would be the perfect excuse for him to no longer be aboard. Then again, not having his own vessel was hardly justification enough for his continuing presence, and he realized in a sudden flash that if he did have the ability to just leave he might have to explain why he remained. “I don’t even know if it’s still there.”

Data opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated when something nearby distracted him. It was unperceivable to LaForge’s human ears, but Lore heard it too.

“Anna’s always been curious.” Larson laughed under his breath. “This must be the extreme version of curious Anna.”

Lore turned away. Larson was on the other side of the junction room door, but he might as well have been next to him. He saw the uneasy look on Data’s face. “Your hearing is as good as mine,” Lore sneered, “Has it been an interesting morning?”
Data shifted his eyes quite awkwardly, something that Lore was not used to in his formerly emotionless brother. “Yes, it has.” Data admitted.

LaForge, taking the unsung social cue, departed to the control room, leaving them alone.

“Good.” Lore said, his eyes shifting angrily to the junction room door. “Maybe it will give you a realistic glimpse of what you can expect if you ever have the audacity to be interested in a woman.”

Data tilted his head with a quick smile, “Then it is true?”

“No! I ju…agh!”

“But you wish it were?” He replied quickly.

Lore grimaced and could hardly believe his ears. Was he having a conversation with Data? Was he having a relationship conversation with Data? “It’s none of your business.”

Data’s smile widened to a light smirk, “Forgive me, Lore, but it appears to be everyone’s business. And to refer to your last comment, I do see it as a ‘glimpse of what I can expect’. It is quite encouraging.”

Lore shook his head, “I don’t know if you’re fatally optimistic or just stupid. You’ve heard what they are saying about her, and it isn’t exactly meant to increase her social standing, Data!” He took a step closer to Data, “They are punishing her for being my friend. You can’t possibly think that is ‘encouraging’.”

Data gave him a curious look, as if he could not quite figure out something. Then, realization hit, and Data nodded, “No, Lore, I do not find that encouraging. However, I am encouraged by other things.”

Oh, for crying out loud. “Living with humans hasn’t just made you stupid, it’s made you vague too. What the Hell does that mean—? You know what? I don’t care. Are you going to give me the shuttle craft or not?”

Data’s smile widened even further, “Certainly. I will speak with the Captain.”

The relative ease of Data’s agreement was not something Lore expected, and he considered him suspiciously. He knew that subtly content look, for he had seen it so many times on his own face. Data knew something that he did not. But his thoughts on that were interrupted as the junction room door opened and John Larson half emerged, his back to the room.

“I think you’re just sore because you’re not Hall’s type.” Lieutenant Briggs said as he stepped around Larson and emerged from the junction room.

Larson sneered and rolled his eyes as he turned toward the control table. “That’s right, Briggs. I’m too warm-blooded and might actually expect something from her.”

That old comfortable rage seethed through Lore’s mind. It was like a scent from childhood. “Thanks for the shuttle, Data. I’ll be waiting in the main bay.” With that he stepped past Data and around the control table just as Larson approached. Their eyes met for a second before Lore stopped, tilted his head, and punched him square in the face.

Larson stumbled backward, slamming into the warp core railing and falling to the side. Blood ran from his nose in a thick, frightening stream as he tried to pull himself onto his knees, but he
only fell back onto his side with an agonizing groan.

“Lore!” Data glared at his brother in a fury and moved to intercede, but Lore had already turned toward the exit.

“Too late, Data, you already said yes!” He tossed happily over his shoulder as he sauntered toward the doors. “By the way, I think I’ll take one of the standard craft instead of one of the pods. I like to stretch out.”

Paralyzed silence followed him as he reached the exit and went left, and like the applause after an orchestra’s last note, the commotion erupted.

“Oh, God!” Larson wailed in a strange, throaty gurgle, “I think… agh! That fucking thing broke my nose!”

Lore took a deep, satisfied breath and laughed.
Chapter 32

“Mr. Reed’s prey left the den.”

Lore had a sneaking suspicion that the bay doors would not open and that the little craft he currently inhabited would not be moving an inch. Instead, he imagined an unfortunate scene in which security personnel appeared to inform him that he would be transported to the brig and charged with assault of a Starfleet officer. As unfavorable as such an outcome was, he accepted its possibility. After all, it would be worth it, and the more he thought about other possible outcomes, the more he was certain he could handle them. No, he was certain he could handle them! After all, there was nothing he could not handle. He had never shied away from anything, and he couldn’t believe that he was doing it now. He should never have been so uneasy, so worried.

It was amazing what confidence a little aggression could produce.

He double checked the system display and reached for the hatch door panel, “Lore to control. I’m ready for launch.” As he pressed the control for the hatch door, a small obstruction alarm sounded, and he turned to see what the problem was. Oh.

Anna stepped onto the rear ramp and peered around the corner at him. “Hello.”

He half raised himself out of the seat and wondered if she had yet heard. But who was he kidding? Of course she had heard. Starfleet command had probably already heard. “Hello. Still angry at me?”

Anna smiled at the ceiling and stepped inside. She took the co-pilot seat without ceremony. “I’ll tell you later. Let’s get out of here first.”

Even though he could still see no reason for her to be upset with him, he decided that getting away from the ship was the most important thing at the moment. He retook his position and closed the hatch door. The shuttle bay went dim and the emergency flashers started as the sesame doors opened and their shuttle glided out into the vacuum of space.

“Enterprise to shuttle craft two,” Came Data’s serene tone, “Rendezvous in no more than two hours.”

“Yes, mother.” Lore said before tapping the comm, “Understood. Shuttle two out.” The craft veered to the right and the silver glow of the Enterprise left their view. He glanced at Anna with a half concealed smile, for he was sure she was no longer angry with him. But, there was the possibility and he decided to tease her. “Too bored to stay on the Enterprise?”

Anna took the controls, the corners of her mouth twitching under the strain of a smile. As she turned the shuttle in the direction of their target, another far less attractive sight met their eye. The unmistakably rounded box of a Bolian ship entered their view like a tombstone. Just as with the Corona Six station, the external bay doors were left open, like wounds on a dead animal.

“The crew was killed.” Anna said somberly, “It doesn’t look like they even tried to get them off the ship. The escape pods were stolen.”
Lore closed his eyes for a moment and looked away. His intrinsically narcissistic nature would not allow him to view the event separate from himself, for had he not played a role in this? From what little information he could gather on Narok Reed, he had come to the conclusion that the man had once led a very different life, and it had certainly not been a life in which he had murdered strangers and committed piracy. Lore had made Narok Reed. He stared at the dark little ship until it left their view and was replaced by the stark rays of the red dwarf star.

“You broke John’s nose.” Anna said quietly, her voice barely rising above the hum of the engines. “And one of his front teeth.”

Lore kept his eyes forward, “I’m not sorry, Anna.”

“Neither am I.” She gave him a guarded smile, “Thank you.”

“Thank you?” He could hardly contain his pleasant surprise. “I have to admit, that’s the first time I’ve ever been thanked for assaulting someone.”

“It was probably the first time you assaulted someone who deserved it.” She said. She took a cursory look over the console and initiated a scan of the system. “I, eh… I know some of the things that people were saying. Blake decided to tell me.”

And what do you think about them?

He examined her concerned expression and felt the cold twinge of uncertainty again. He reminded himself quite forcefully that Anna appeared no more pleased by Larson’s rumors than anyone else, and it only made Data’s words more irritating. His brother had been right. Lore did wish the rumors were true. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Sorry?” She returned, “What did you do? This is John’s fault. Damn selfish, pig-headed John who won’t accept that I’m not with him any more—” She cut herself off with a sudden intake of breath and appeared to study the console screens.

Any more? Anna had ‘been with’ Larson? What did that mean? Humans and their vague euphemisms! A feeling like profound pressure consumed him and he could not hold back, “You had a romantic relationship with Larson?”

Anna flushed till the tips of her ears blended with her hair. “Years ago, when I was just a dumb ensign and I was afraid to be away from home. Everyone was once young and stupid, Lore. Well,” She glanced at him, “almost everyone.”

Lore burst into a fit of laughter. He couldn’t help it, and the sound startled even him. It was like the mad laughter of someone who was trying to avoid misery. “I may not have been ‘young’, Anna, but I sure as Hell was stupid! Be thankful your ‘youthful transgressions’ were just Larson. Mine were murder!”

Anna stared at him with wide, shocked eyes, her fingers hovering frozen over the controls.

Oh, God! Idiot! He turned away from her and focused his eyes on the hovering solar system outside. He had gone too far this time. He was letting his unease show, and it was only a matter of time before she would guess at the source of his behavior. But what if she did guess? Would that be so bad? He finally had her alone—truly alone—and he was wasting it. Like a sudden epiphany that was no news at all, he accepted that he could not remain her friend forever. He simply couldn’t, not when he longed for so much more.

“Did you tell Data what we’re going to get?” She asked suddenly, her voice a little waver.
“Yes. He wouldn’t agree otherwise.”

“And you’re still not going to tell me.” She surmised, frowning.

He looked at her and smiled openly. Why was she so easy with him? “That’s right.”

She grumbled in an exaggerated way. “That’s still not fair.”

He turned fully towards her, “Idiots aren’t very fair.” Yes, that’s right. Pull the subject back further. He wasn’t sure why he did it, but the whole odd scenario in the corridor still troubled him and he needed to know. Plus, it might divert attention from his current fumbles.

Anna turned her face down and grinned over pink cheeks. “Sorry about that. I guess I overreacted.”

“Overreacted to what? That’s what has me confused.” He ran over the situation again in perfect detail and was still rather at a loss.

She shrugged several times, and with far too much dismissal. “You said that something was ridiculous and maybe I didn’t think it was so ridiculous.”

Ridiculous? The only thing he had declared to be ridiculous was the idea that Larson’s rumors could possibly be true. He remembered quite distinctly stating that what was truly ridiculous was the idea that he…that she would…Oh! He stared at her blankly, but so much churned beneath the surface. “That’s…not ridiculous?”

Anna brought a shaky hand to her face and rubbed at her temple, her eyes still firmly fixed on the sprawling solar system beyond. She was fidgety in a way he had never seen her. She turned suddenly to look at him, “What were you dreaming about when I woke you this morning?”

“What?” He let his hands and eyes drop away from the controls. “Why—?”

Before he could respond, or even decide if he would, he saw the horrified look on Anna’s face. He followed her gaze, and to the far right of their view, the solid black sheet of space wavered like a rippling pond. It took but a moment for them to recognize it. “There’s a ship decloaking. Come around!”

Lore maneuvered to follow the scene as the ship decloaked. It was a massive vessel, only a bit smaller than the Enterprise, but of no design he had ever seen. In fact, the entire thing looked like a tinkering hodgepodge of designs, but the description was more than enough. He knew this vessel, and he knew of its Captain. “Reed.”

“Hall to Enterprise. We are returning immediat—” Anna’s breath rushed from her as the pirate vessel opening a volley of disruptor fire onto the Enterprise. The Enterprise’s shields sparked and wavered, but held their ground as the ship returned with a more conservative bought of well-aimed phaser blasts.

Lore grabbed the con and spun the shuttle around, placing the scene behind them in a flash.

“What are you doing?” She objected, grabbing his hand.

“We can’t help them, Anna.” Lore said, “And they certainly can’t help us with their shields up. We have to take cover.”

She gritted her teeth, ready to object again, but fell to the console instead, “Agreed. If we hold
ourselves over the magnetic field of the second moon, we should avoid detection. I’ll send an
encrypted message to the Enterprise—"

“No! They will intercept it.” He was mere words away from explaining all of his suspicions, for
in the few seconds that had passed he had concluded quite assuredly that the Enterprise had
stepped right into a trap, and he was the intended prey. But, as he watched the continuing battle,
the pirate ship suddenly broke off. After a few more finely placed shots from the Enterprise, the
ship sprang to warp in a bright flash.

“Enterprise to shuttle two. Maintain your position and await instructions. Picard out.” The
Captain’s voice had hardly faded before the Enterprise turned and vanished at warp eight. For
several long seconds, Anna and Lore stood over the con and stared at the now vacant starscape. At
that speed, it would only be seconds before the Enterprise was already out of communications
range.

“Why would they still be here?” Anna asked, shaking her head, “If they were cloaked, why
didn’t they just flee?”

Lore continued to star at the stars, his ease slipping away with each passing second, “Because
they didn’t have what they had come for yet.”

Anna shook her head, “Stripping a Bolian medical vessel can’t be worth getting killed. They
must have seen the Enterprise coming on long range sensors.”

Lore glanced down at the console readouts and slowly took his seat. “I don’t think they were
after the medical ship, Anna. They stripped it hours ago. They had no reason to remain.”

He saw the readout before the alarm sounded and had just enough time to press Anna into the
chair as the craft lurched to one side. A cracking green flash spread across the viewport, wrapping
around the ship like lightning bolts.

“Now what!” Anna shouted, pulling herself back into her seat.

Lore recognized it without any trouble. “We’ve been hit. Disruptor fire!”

“From who—”

The shuttle dropped as if some great hand had slapped it from above. For a second, the very
deck beneath their feet moved faster than they, and Anna landed on the edge of the console with a
painful cry. “Agh! Hall to Enterprise! We’re under attack!”

“It’s too late!” Lore shouted over the rush of coolant that had begun to spray in the back of the
shuttle. “They’re out of range!” Another blast struck the shuttle head on, halting them so violently
that Lore had to press his hands against the console to keep his footing, but Anna lost hers entirely
and was sent tumbling forward onto the console, smashing into the viewport.

“Anna!”

He reached her before she could tumble back to the deck, but she did not respond. A thick line
of blood flowed from a gash near her temple, and her eyes fluttered in a terrifying spasm. “No!”

The shuttle jolted again as another burst of disruptor blast crawled across the viewport. With as
much haste and gentleness as he could, he lowered her onto the deck and flung himself at the
controls. A cacophony of alarms and warnings filled the cabin, enough to confuse and terrify any
human occupant, but he took all of it in with cold clarity. The left warp nacelle was destroyed and
spewing plasma at an alarming rate, destroying any possibility of a sudden escape. By performing their duty to protect the shuttle occupants from irreparable harm, the inertial dampeners had drained nearly thirty percent of the shuttle’s power reserves, and life support would soon give out.

The shuttle jolted, blindsided once more by the unseen assailant. Finally, Lore was able to target the source and spin the craft around. The white atmosphere of Martzy Four filled the viewport with an alarming proximity, but it was the perfect backdrop for the two craft bearing down on him. He recognized them immediately, though they were much changed. The outdated shuttle craft from the Corona Six station had been unimpressive white cubes, virtually harmless in their purpose and use. Now the two shuttles he saw were pot-marked with ugly and fierce additions. Small yield disruptors and external shield emitters covered the shuttle roofs, like barnacles on a once beautiful whale.

“Life support at forty-two percent.” The Computer announced, “Unable to redirect. Plasma levels insufficient from transfer.”

Lore slammed his fist on the console, his face contorting in a rage. The bright haze of Martzy Four filled the cabin with stark shadows and bleached white surfaces. It was much like his dream, but he had thought that so beautiful. There was nothing beautiful about this. It drained the color from the world.

“Incoming hail.”

The alarms and warnings ceased, and Lore looked down at Anna. She had not moved from the position in which he had placed her, and the blood flow from her head appeared to have slowed. But silver linings did nothing for the unspeakable rage churning inside him. “Computer,” He said slowly, “Open a channel.”

“Hello, Lore.”

He was sure he felt cold, “Hello, Narok.”

A silence followed which he could not understand. The only goal he could imagine floating in Reed’s head was to kill him, and that could be done in an instant. There was almost nothing he could do. The shuttle had no weapons, and even if it had, the energy was depleting so rapidly as to make them useless. In five minutes the life support would fail and Anna would be dead. In seven minutes the shields would fail, and he would join her.

He did the only thing he could think of, and hoped that it was something Reed had no yet considered. “Computer, terminate life support and avert all remaining power to shields and thrusters. Position for a hard angle entry!”

The computer beeped its consent, and Lore could swear he heard a subtle admonishment in the sound, but there was no time to do sensible things. Sensible things required energy, and that was running out fast. He knelt down next to Anna and brought her up in his arms to carry her to the back of the cabin. He laid her on the long cushioned bench and retrieved the emergency restraints from under the back rest, securing them over her as best he could in a lying position.

Another blast of disruptor fire sent the shuttle pitching like a ship in a storm, and he held Anna fast to secure the last restraint over her chest.

“Lower your shields, Lore.” Reed’s dead-calm voice echoed through the cabin, so much like every other Vulcan he had ever heard. “You’re only prolonging this.”
Lore laughed. It was a bitter, almost insane sound. “Much to your delight, Narok?” Part of him considered what would happen if he gave up. Perhaps if he implored, begged, they would simply leave Anna in the shuttle, and the Enterprise would find her in time to help her. The idea was repulsive. He would do anything for her, but relegating her to the mercy of a madman was not something he was prepared to do. He looked down at her and with a sudden, almost desperate motion, he leaned down and kissed the top of her head. “Computer, engage descent.”

The shuttle veered down and to the left at a hard angle, tipping its nose directly toward the planet below. Lore made his way back to the command chair and used what remaining power they had to slow and navigate their descent, but the shuttle bucked continuously under the strain, and the view became completely obscured by the fiery mantle that soon surrounded them.

“Shield strength at twenty percent. Hull temperature in excess of two thousand Kelvins.”

Lore ignored the computer warning and forced the shuttle on. A sudden shift in weight told him that the port nacelle was gone, dismembered and destroyed by the atmospheric fire storm. The external sensors were still functioning enough to tell him that he was still being pursued, but it was to their detriment. Martzy Four had a secret that most people never survived to tell.

That’s right. Keep following me.

A second later the console went dead and the shuttle began to fall.

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Why will they not cloak? It does not make sense?

Data examined the sensor readout with meticulous detail, but like the dozen he had conducted before it, it gave no answer. Reed’s vessel was not damaged enough to keep it from cloaking, yet there it remained.

“Damage report!” Picard finally demanded after retaking his seat and staring with fixed, angry eyes at the vessel before them. They were fast on its tail, but each increase in speed was matched.

“Minor damage to the hull on the port nacelle. Ten Forward reports minor injuries.” Worf announced his teeth gnashing together with the urge to fire at will.

Data turned back to the console. The disruptor blasts were nothing compared to what the vessel was capable of. It was no match for the Enterprise to be sure, but it was certainly capable of more damage than it had wrought. He turned in his seat, “Captain, I believe we are being baited.”

Picard closed his eyes for a moment. It was the expression he gave when his own suspicions were confirmed.

“Baited for what?” Riker mused as he too leveled a glare at the screen before them. “What kind of trap could they be leading us to?”

Data considered. Pirates rarely targeted Starships and did everything they could to avoid them. In fact, Reed had to know that his first attack on the Enterprise had brought him too much attention from authorities. To destroy or damage a starship would mean an absolute manhunt. Data glanced back at the console and felt a strange heavy feeling, as if he were being pressed into his seat.
Considering the source of it, he was rather surprised.

“Captain, I do not believe we are being led into a trap. I believe we are being distracted.” Seeing their attention fixed, he continued, “I have finished going over the navigational logs from the Bolian medical ship. Its course would not have brought it within ten light years of the Martzy system.”

An angry snort erupted from Worf as he folded his arms. “We were led to a dish like dogs.”

“But why?” Troi leaned forward in her chair, “Why lead us to this system only to turn around and lead us somewhere else?”

There was a short pause as everyone came to the same conclusion at once. Data felt the weight on him increase, and Picard sighed with as much exasperation and anger.

“It’s clear,” Picard grumbled, “Mr. Reed’s prey left the den. Mr. Data, all stop!”

The ship came to a dull stop, fast enough for it to register in the crews’ guts. They all watched the viewscreen for the few seconds it took for Reed’s vessel to shrink to a dot and vanish ahead of them. They continued to wait.

“Captain?” Riker ventured.

“A little patience, Number One.” Picard turned and retook his seat. He continued to watch the screen.

Data tried anxiously to keep his calm, but he was finding it difficult for more reasons than one. He was worried about Lore, and that worried him. “Captain, if Reed’s intent was to distract us so that he could pursue Lore—.”

“I think that’s clear, but….” Picard sighed irritably, “I don’t think Mr. Reed is stupid enough to think that we would blindly follow his ship forever. I think there is more bait here than we realize.”

“The Bolians.” Troi said at once, “They have the Bolians.”

“Captain!” Data said suddenly, “Reed’s vessel has reversed course!”

Worf scoffed, “We are being hailed.”

“Here it comes.” Riker said as he stood, along with the Captain, and faced the screen, “On viewer.”

Rather than facing the cold stare of one of one of Reed’s henchmen, a bloated blue face filled the screen suddenly. The man cringed horrible, and his blue skin glistened under a film of sweat and tears. The viewer was zoomed in so closely on the man’s face that one could just barely make out the dark, hairy hand that gripped the back of his neck.

“St—stay where you are!” The man belted nervously, “You will… eh…maintain a complete stop until you are instructed to do otherwise.” He took several frantic breaths, and his blood shot eyes shifted left as if he were watching something off screen, “We…I am Captain Frill of the Bolian Medical vessel Poesish. My crew are being held—agh!” He cringed in a violent spasm of pain, and for a few seconds he was doubled over. He was pulled back up by the neck and practically throttled. “Don’t leave! Don’t move, or they’ll…they’ll kill us all—!”
The signal ceased abruptly.

Data was shocked to feel his heart sink. They were not going anywhere, and there was no way to tell if Lore and Lt. Hall were dead or alive.
Chapter 33

“Do you remember what happened?”

Buel Kala kicked at a charred, mangled piece of hull plating. It tumbled over the edge of the rocks and flipped down the burnt hillside with a crash. The small expression of anger only helped to increase her irritation as she looked over the wreck below.

“Son of a bitch almost got us killed!” She fumed as she weighed the rock in her hand and slung it at the lopsided wreck. It bounced off the hull with a loud crack that left no echo. Every sound was muffled by the thick line of trees behind them, and the grey cliff ahead left nothing but empty air beyond.

The forest behind them climbed up a steep hillside for nearly a hundred feet. Above that was fifty thousand square kilometers of rocky, treacherous plateau, dotted here and there with thick forests and streams. It was beautiful. At least, Buel Kala would have thought so, had she the time. But now was not the time. She took the lead down the scared hillside, keeping just to the edge of the black rut that the shuttle had carved into the ground during its landing. She could see the exposed layer of rock that must have caught the port nacelle and torn it from the shuttle. The nacelle was nowhere to be seen, but she assumed that it had met its end over the edge of the cliff that began just a few yards on the other side of the wreck. The fact that the shuttle had managed to crash into the plateau, slide down the hillside, and stop just before going over the edge of the cliff was simply astonishing to her. Perhaps machines did have luck after all. She knew this one did.

Klar pulled his disruptor and pointed it shakily at the wreck as he followed down the hillside with clumsy, uneven steps. “What will we do if he’s still alive?” The Ferengi whispered.

“Die I suppose.” Buel shrugged with a smirk. She loved tormenting people like Klar. Ferengi were shrewd businessmen, and even shrewder cons, but they had no business being in more aggressive enterprises. “Just make sure that your aim is good. We might not be able to get more than one shot out off these disruptors.” As if having reminded herself of their predicament, she pulled her disruptor and felt it’s useless weight in her hands. Perhaps it would fire, perhaps not. The sudden deactivation of their shuttle’s systems had left her wondering if anything could work on this planet. It had been only a minute after entering the atmosphere that the shuttle’s systems had started to shut down, energy being drained by some unseen force. They had had barely enough energy left to make a crash landing.

“Look. Why don’t we just go back to the shuttle and wait to be transported out. They might not find us if we stay away from the shuttle!” Klar bellowed, already beginning to crawl back up the hillside.

“Sure,” She scoffed, “And I’ll tell Reed that you decided you didn’t want his latinum. I guess your life is more important than profit.”

“How dare you insult me like that!” Klar pressed his hand to his chest, “I have risked my life many times for profit!”
Buel shook her head. No matter how much time she spent with Ferengis, their honest self examinations continued to amaze her. “Fine. Just keep your place and don’t lower that weapon.” She crouched down once she reached the side of the wreck and moved around to the roof. The shuttle had lodged itself into the ground in a strange position, leaving it almost turned onto its side. As cautious as she was, she doubted very much that it was necessary. If the android was still alive, then he had already heard their approach and every word they had said, which would make stealth pointless. The closer she got, the more she began to think that she was making a terrible mistake.

*I’ll give him Reed if I have to,* she told herself quickly. She would not get any reward out of the android, but at least it might save her life. She didn’t like Reed anyway.

As she peered around the corner of the shuttle she could already see that the aft hatch was wide open. Her heart was pounding with excitement. It was the same giddy sense that she had experienced the first time she had stolen something, then heightened the first time she had taken a vessel. Now, it was an engrossing lust that drove her most of the time. She took a deep breath and threw herself on the lowered hatch, her weapon pointing into the dim shadows of the shuttle. Her heart danced and then stumbled.

“Shit! They’re gone!” She scrambled onto her feet like a cat and leveled her weapons at the silent trees beyond, examining every shadow and wavering branch. Nothing.

“Gone! Where could they have gone?” Klar ran down the hillside on shaky knees and stopped, gripping the corner of the shuttle. “What if he died in a transport out? Do you think Reed will still give us our money? Oh! You never, *never,* conduct business without a contract. I insisted on a contract!”

Buel ignored him and moved into the dim shuttle. It was the height of the day, and the thick cloud cover above created a bright, white-out effect that washed the shadows away from everything. The shuttle was turned at a mild angle, making it difficult to walk on the carpeted floor. She looked around carefully. What had he taken with him? What had he left behind? “Why did he take the other one?”

Klar was breathing heavily as he came around the hatch and stepped inside. “What? Take the other what?”

“There was a human with him.” She mused, “Why would he take her too?”

Klar understood as well as she, “Reed said he…well, he’s….I got the impression that this android didn’t care for others at all.” He looked up, “Maybe the human just went with him of her own accord. Better than staying behind.”

Buel shook her head slowly as she ran her hand across the dark carpet. She lifted it into the light, and the blood was so thick it ran down her fingers, “No. I don’t think that human went anywhere of her own accord.”

***

Lore dumped out the bag’s contents in a panic, letting everything clatter into a pile. He found the dermal regenerator and bone suture instantly and pulled himself to Anna’s side. She lay on the
soft sand next to the stream, her head resting on the grass of the embankment. Lore cradled her face in his hands, hoping for any sign of consciousness, but her face was a chalky grey hue, and her lips were beginning to look more blue than pink.

“Anna, wake up. Please.” He muttered to himself, knowing that nothing he said was going to change her condition. It was only because he could now see his hands against her skin that he realized he was shaking. Actually shaking! He lowered gently back onto the grass and clenched his hands together. He had never felt like this before. Even in his most severe moments of rage, he had never felt so panicked.

_Control yourself._ He closed his eyes and opened them slowly. With far more controlled hands, he parted the blood matted hair on the side of her head and examined the wound there. It was bad. A deep, half moon gash cut through her scalp, revealing a small amount of the pink-white bone beneath. He looked into the pile of emergency medical supplies and frowned. There was only one medical tricorder, and its power supply had already been given up to the planet’s remorseless EM field. He would have to do medicine the old fashioned way.

_Crusher would be proud._ He laughed a tiny, bitter laugh and brushed his fingers over Anna’s cheek. She was colder than usual, a result of the blood loss she had suffered. He was no doctor, but he knew more than enough about human physiology to be one if he chose, and so he leaned forward and pulled back the tiny flap of scalp on Anna’s wound. A massive wave of relief forced a smile to his face. There was no skull fracture. It would not be _that_ bad.

“Mmm.” Anna turned her head away from his hand and cringed in pain. Her eyes fluttered open, only to clench shut instantly as she tried to roll over.

“No. Don’t move.” He commanded as he took her shoulders and held her still. He positioned himself to block the sunlight from her eyes. “Don’t move. You have a severe concussion.”

She groaned again and waved her hands in front of her in a weak attempt to fight her way up. “My head….” She moaned, barely audible. Her eyes were still half closed, and Lore was sure she had not even acknowledged him.

“Do you remember what happened?” He asked, leaning close to her. Concussions were strange things, he knew. Their results varied almost as much as the methods that could cause them. “Anna, Anna.” He held her face still, gently, and tried to get her to look at him. “Be still.”

Her eyes fluttered again as her head drooped to the side. Her breath became shallow. Lore gasped and pressed his fingers to her neck quickly. Her pulse was even, but it was slow and weak. “Anna.” He whispered again, the tension obvious in his voice now. But she was out cold.

“No, no!” He cried. He brushed the hair away from her face repeatedly, as if that gentle gesture would be enough to wake her. But he knew it was not. He did not have the equipment he needed to alleviate her head injuries, and he certainly did not have the supplies to perform a transfusion, not that he had the blood to do it with anyway. He took up the dermal regenerator without another thought and held it close over her wound. The little device hummed with a soft pink light as he ran it slowly back and forth over the wound, but it did not last long. Just as the edges of the wound began to form a pink netting of new tissue the device fizzled and died, another technological victim of Martzy Four, better known as Martzy Prime.

Lore tossed the now useless thing aside and turned to the equipment bag. It contained nothing but medical supplies, all useless now, but just as he picked up the cloth bag to tear it into strips, he reconsidered. There was no telling how long they would be stuck there. Even if the Enterprise had arrived, external scans from orbit were remarkably difficult, even impossible, on Martzy Prime.
That was why he had chosen that system years before. No one went there. It was too risky. He set the bag aside, deciding that it might be useful if they had to carry something later, and searched for another bandage source. If only he had taken the thermal blankets from the shuttle!

Angry with himself for such a lapse, he pulled his thick grey sweater off over his head and just as quickly removed the thin cotton undershirt he also wore. As he shredded the black shirt into long, thin strips he examined and reexamined everything he had done, thinking of what might have happened if he had done that thing differently or this thing sooner. Other possibilities came to him as well, and he imagined what it would be like if he had to return to the Enterprise without Anna. He saw himself conducting some repair in the Jefferies tubes, alone, and wondered if he would have a reason to ever set foot in Ten Forward again without her. He thought of the eclectic disarray of her quarters and how much he loved it there.

That’s not going to happen, he told himself as he pulled his sweater back on. He watched her for several seconds, hoping that she might stir again. When she did not, he let himself fall back to smoothing the hair away from her face, and he began to gently wrap the long bandages around her head. He knew that it would do nothing to help with the concussion, but it would at least assist in keeping the wound clean, and since they didn’t even have so much as an anti-bacterial hypospray, infection was a possibility. He knew. The Borg had sometimes died of infection.

Even as he focused his eyes on her and drew relief from each breath she took, he kept his ears alert. Save the light trickle of the stream and the brush of wind through the trees, he heard nothing. He was not surprised. It would take anyone who had followed him twice as long to clear the distance he had made, and that without carrying another person. Keeping that in mind, he could not even be sure if ‘they’ had survived their landing at all. It was a real possibility that they had perished in the crash, and he and Anna would only have to wait as long as it took the Enterprise to realize they had been baited. But he could not take that chance, and he was not the sort to wait for others to save his life. He would save his own.

Anna stirred mildly, but gave no indication of regaining consciousness. Determined, and with his plan still thoroughly intact, Lore scooped one arm under her legs and the other behind her back and lifted her with no more effort than if he had picked up a dried leaf. He carefully took a moment to position her arms into her lap, and then moved his arm further back so that her head rested securely against his chest. It was the most comfort he could afford her, and hoped that she would not be in too much pain when she finally awoke. The concern he felt, apart from driving him to near emotional distraction, was a novelty he could not get over. He had never taken care of anyone before, and the idea that his best efforts might not be enough was too much to accept. What if the concussions had caused her brain to swell? What if she suffered a stroke from the trauma, and he would have no way of even knowing?

No. He sloshed into the shallow stream with determined steps, leaving the now useless medical supplies behind. He watched her seemingly tranquil face, stark white against the grey fabric of his sweater, and knew that he would not be without her. If the *Enterprise* did not return to save Anna, then he would do it himself.

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“The Enterprise won’t abandon twenty to save two!” Reed growled into the comm. “Just stay put and hold them there.”
Conner frowned through the visual link, his expression tense. “What should I do if they want some of the hostages? If we don’t give them something, they might just decide it’s a trick, that Frill is the only one we have—”

“Whatever you have to do to keep them there! I don’t care,” Reed was half distracted, as uninterested in the conversation as he could be, but he knew it was a vital part of the equation. “I left you in charge for a reason, Conner. If Picard gets too aggressive, execute a Bolian. That should keep them still.”

Conner’s expression widened in surprise, and despite the fact that it was brief, Reed saw it. “Is that a problem, Conner?” He glared through the screen as if the man were right in front of him.

Conner shook his head, eyes softly closed, “No problems here. How about your end?”

Smart ass human. “Buel and Klar crashed. I told them to stay clear of the atmosphere, but Buel must not be as smart as she pretends to be.”

Conner’s face was blank, “Is there any way of contacting them?”

“From the surface, yes, but not from orbit. Keep your position, Conner. That’s all you have to do. Reed out.” He closed the channel with a curt slap of the panel and continued his thoughtful examination of the planet below.

An EM field. Very lucky, Lore….Reed rested his chin on his hands and tilted his head in an odd fashion, staring at the blue-white planet as if the swirls in its atmosphere would give him some solution. He should have known about this, and the fault made him grind his teeth in frustration. It was an empty system, one that hosted almost no traffic and absolutely no visitors. He should have known there would be a reason why! After all, beautiful and fertile planets don’t stay uninhabited unless there is a very good reason. An EM field was a rather good reason.

A frustrated growl escaped his lips and he slammed his fist down on the arm of the chair. It was supposed to be so easy. He had him right there in his sights. How could he let him get away! The possibility that Lore may have perished in the crash was only a minor consolation. After all, that would have been an accidental death, and Lore did not deserve something so innocent. Lore deserved pain and torment, two things that Reed knew he could never inflict on a machine.

He stood now and moved quickly to the back of the shuttle. He had only one possible solution, and despite the fact that it was not fool proof, it was all he had. He took three transporter tracers from the storage drawer under the bench and set them aside while he immediately began to disassemble various tricorders, flashlights, and other equipment that he knew he would not need. He dropped the small, cylindrical power cores of each device into a pile and scooped them all into a backpack, along with two of the disassembled phasers and one of the tricorders. A small tool kit followed along with water packs and a pair of binoculars. His face was a dark wall as he zipped the bag shut and slung it over his back.

“Computer, set an automatic transporter retrieval for these three tracers in thirty-six hours. Maintain synchronous orbit.” He was remarkably calm. It felt as if his heart was not moving at all. “Computer, one to transport to last known search coordinates. Energize.”
Chapter 34

“I liked it better when we just stole things.”

Captain Besha Frill tried to keep his footing and move quickly ahead, but a towering Nausicaan continued to jab him with the point of his disruptor at every turn. First he would be pushed ahead, commanded to hurry, then just as quickly jerked back by the collar and told to turn this way or hurry down that corridor. As if he could lead the way! As if he knew where they were supposed to be going!

“Please! Why have you taken me and my crew? What do you mean to—”

“Hold your tongue, Bolian eel.” The Nausicaan, Brishek, snarled and continued to push him along.

Captain Frill wept silently to himself and continued to move quickly ahead. Eel? Eel! He frowned just as much as he wanted to cry. Bolians bore no resemblance at all to eels. It was an utterly unfounded insult! He pressed his hand to his side and tried to soothe the throbbing pain there, but to no avail. His forced speed made the pain only worse. He glanced over his shoulder and up, “If we could just have one of the medical kits from our ship, we could use it ourselves and—”

“Agh!” Brishek grabbed Frill by his collar as if taking some animal by the scruff of its neck, and shoved him into the room they had just approached. “We will decide what to give you and when!”

Clearly. Frill almost rolled his eyes at the atrocious show of power. They had already taken his vessel and disemboweled it like a roast. They had already killed two of his crewmen in the effort. What else was there? He recognized the room they came to, for it was the same dungeon from which he had been dragged earlier. He saw with much relief the remaining compliment of his crew huddled together in a far corner, their blue faces even bluer behind the sparkle of an unstable force field. He took the moment between shoves to look around the rest of the room. There were others there with weapons, nameless members of this pirate crew whom he had seen before in a blur, but also another.

A young man sat on a far desk, one of his legs propped unceremoniously on the chair before him. Frill examined him quickly. His skin was a pinkish ivory color, like that of living wood, and there were no ridges on his nose. Frill looked closer. There were no points on his ears, nor V shaped protrusions from his forehead. He was like a blank creature, an empty canvas devoid of additions.

A human! Frill stumbled over his own feet and looked the man straight in the eye, his judgment lacking for all his past experiences with the creatures of Earth. He had never had a bad dealing with a human. He had never been at the receiving end of injustice from a human either, and the biases he had formed from a life among good humans made him forget himself. “Oh! Please give us some of our medical supplies. We have injured!”

The human at first appeared quite shocked by the pleading address and looked as he would reply, but another harsh shove from the Nausicaan appeared to change his mind, and he merely
looked away. Frill almost groaned in his pain and frustration as the force field was lowered and he was pushed like a piece of rubbish into the holding cell. He stumbled and fell to his knees, the pain in his side aching even more as he fell. Several of his crew rushed away from the weak security of their group and worked to pull him back amongst them. He had never been so happy to see another Bolian face, and yet still he could not keep himself from staring at the human.

“When is this going to be over?” The human groaned, tilting his head back and running his fingers roughly through his stiff brown hair.

“Do you tire of babysitting?” Brishek asked with a hardy laugh. It was like Nausicaans to find amusement in themselves. No one else did. “Perhaps I should take your place, Conner, if chattel herding is not to your favor.”

Frill watched with fascination as the human leveled a truly nasty frown at Brishek, “Anyone can ‘herd chattel’, Brishek. It takes a special jerk to get pleasure out of poking them.”

Brishek snarled and took an aggressive step forward. “I warn you, human, I do not need you to share in the latinum.”

“Oh, really?” The cocky young man brought his other foot into the chair now, and rested his elbows on his knees. “Reed left me the command codes, so I guess he trusts this ‘hu-man’ more than you.”

Frill darted his eyes between both men. Surely the human must know he would stand no chance in a fight with that beast, and Nausicaans were not known for their self control. Brishek clenched his fists at his side for several seconds, his teeth grinding almost audibly. With a sudden burst of movement that could just as easily been an attack, he stormed from the room.

The other two guards looked at each other with amused expressions. They were both Farian, and even appeared to be twins. Frill now darted his eyes between them and the human, Conner, for he could not let go of his hope.

“If Reed wanted a pet, I could have recommended a dog.” Conner smiled as he leaned back, letting his head rest against the wall. “I liked it better when we just stole things.”

The Farians exchanged glances again, quite amused. “That Nausicaan is going to kill you.” Said the first.

“No doubt about it. The first chance he gets.” Said the other.

Conner shrugged. “Everyone on this ship wants to kill someone. Maybe whoever has it out for Brishek will get him before he gets me.”

The two Farians raised their eyebrows in unison, for they understood the first reference. It made their amusement fade. One of them took a step forward, lowering his rifle from the force field and giving Conner a serious expression. “Look, you know the rest of the crew haven’t been told anything. What’s going on with Reed? What are we doing here?”

Conner clenched his jaw and frowned, uncertain. He even glanced over his shoulder at the cobalt group of prisoners. “Make you a deal. I let you guys take off so you can get some food and I can get some sleep, and I’ll level with you when you come back. And trust me, this story’s worth the wait.”

The first Farian tilted his head slightly, giving Conner a suspicious look, but as so often happens with aliens he appeared to conclude that it was just the strange behavior of humans. He nodded at
the opportunity and gave one last look at the Bolian prisoners. “Deal. What do humans say? Press down the fort?”

“That’s ‘hold down the fort’, and yes I will.” Conner laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back against the wall with a relieved sigh. He closed his eyes as if perfectly prepared to fall asleep, and the Farians both cast their weapons over their shoulders and talked as they left the room.

Frill struggled to sit up, but gentle hands pressed on his shoulders.

“No, just pretend to be asleep.” Whispered the woman at his side. Frill looked up at her dark, concerned eyes. She was one of the best nurses he had on his crew. “They will just hurt you again.”

Frill grunted as he pulled himself stubbornly to a seated position. His side ached from the ribs that he knew were broken, or at least cracked. During the initial attack he had been walking across the bridge with a steaming cup of Klingon coffee—wonderful stuff—in his hand when the deck had seemed to slide out from under him. He had fallen forward onto the side of his command chair, his ribs landing full on the arm in a painful crack.

“No, no. I’m fine, Shoola. Stay here.” He waved her back as he began to work himself to his feet.

“What are you doing? Captain!” Shoola whispered in a panic and tried to grab his arm.

“No, no. Stay put.” He shushed her and all the other. Their blue faces looked up at him in stark horror, and he shook his head to think of it. They were medical workers, all of them, the most caring and peaceful members of Bolian society. They had done nothing to deserve this. They deserved none of what might yet befall them.

He turned and felt his breath dragging him down. “Sir? Human?”

Conner opened his eyes and stared at him blankly.

“I’m sorry.” Frill raised his hands, “I don’t know your name. Please, we have injured here. We just need a few of our medical kits. That’s all I ask. They don’t have any weapons or things like that in them.”

Conner closed his eyes again and turned his face away, but it was only for an instant. He sat up and rubbed his hands over his face roughly, as if he had not slept for some time. “Be quiet.”

Frill felt the pain his side increase with his own panicked breaths. He could see something in this young man’s eyes. He was tired, stressed. He did not have the sick exhilaration of dominion that he saw in the eyes of the others. He continuing, knowing very well that it might mean his end. “My lead nurse, she has a bad cut on her leg that will grow infected. We have to treat her or she may die. Please—”

Conner kicked his chair away from the desk in a violent fury. Frill almost stumbled back from the edge of the force field as his crew whimpered in a panic, but the human came nowhere near them. With long, storming steps he made for the door and disappeared into the corridor. There was silence for several seconds before a gentle hand rested on Frills shoulder.

“You tried, Captain.” Shoola whispered, “Maybe we are being held for ransom. Maybe we won’t be here much longer.”
Frill’s heart sank. It was the strict policy of the Bolian order to not negotiate with terrorists or kidnappers. Even now that he was looking at his own death, he could not really bring himself to argue with the rule. “Yes, I’m sure it won’t be much longer.” He lied, “See to the others and try to calm them. Encourage them to sleep—”

Shoola jumped when the door hissed open again and Conner stormed into the room. Both his hands were brimming with the straps of small red boxes. He dropped several of the boxes in front of him and slapped a control panel on the wall. The force field blinked out and fresh air rushed into the little prison.

Conner kicked the boxes across the floor and tossed the others forward with a disdainful crash. As soon as they had slid across the floor and came to a halt at the Bolians’ feet, he reactivated the force field and backed toward the door.

A rush of gratitude made its way through Frill’s fear, but he did not smile. That would not have been good. “Thank you.”

Conner did not even acknowledge him. Instead, he stared at the floor for a few seconds, lost in thought, then turned and left the room once more.

The jumble of Bolians opened up as they reached for the boxes and examined their contents. Hyposprays and anti-bacterial ointments made the rounds, but Frill could see quite quickly that the tricorders had been removed from the cases.

“Captain,” Came Shoola’s surprised voice. “There’s food. And water.”

Frill looked down at her. She held in her lap two open med kits, but the typical contents had been removed along with the foam inserts. Instead, both cases had been stuffed with field rations and plastic water packs. His sore throat ached at the sight.

Shoola’s dark eyes were glistening. “The human must have done it. That young human.”

Frill nodded, trying not to look too happy. It would not due to get everyone’s hopes up. “Very good. See that a ration is kept, Shoola.” As he took a painful seat on the floor next to her, his eyes moved back to the closed door.

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Data was the last to enter the conference room. He had not meant to be late, but it had been only in the last half hour that he had seen an epiphany.

“Are you familiar with auto-immune implants?” Data asked as he moved immediately to the viewscreen. The question was quick and unintroduced, but Data was not quite feeling himself. He was on edge.

Crusher swiveled in her chair, “Yes, I’ve heard of them. They contain the information to make an anti-body for virtually every known curable disease.”

“Correct, Doctor.” Data pressed a few controls to activate the screen. A black and yellow diagram showed the simple outlines of a small, tubular object, which spun to show its full view. “This is a schematic of a class A auto-immune implant. It is the same model currently in use by the
Bolian government to inoculate its deployed medical personnel. Every member of Captain Frill’s crew should have received this implant.”

Riker leaned forward on his elbows with an understandably confused expression. It wasn’t like to Data to begin explanations in the middle. “What exactly does this thing do?”

Crusher sighed, “It’s the best immune system you’ve ever seen, Will. Basically, it’s a tiny computer that contains all the information known about every disease, as well as the mechanism for creating a matching anti-body. The implant scans its host every twenty or thirty hours, depending on the model, and notes any viruses that might be present. If there’s a virus, it produces the appropriate anti-body on the spot and the host doesn’t succumb to the illness.”

Riker leaned back in his chair, astonished, “Forgive me for sounding naïve, but why isn’t this something that everyone has?”

Data moved around the table to his seat, “The primary side-effect of the auto-immune implant is that it deteriorates the body’s ability to produce its own white T cells. Eventually the host’s immune system will be so crippled that it will no longer be able to use even the anti-bodies which the implant provides. It significantly shortens the host’s life span.” His eyes darted back to the implant schematic, for his usually inquisitive nature could not muster any interest in the history of the implant. That didn’t matter. Getting back to the Martzy system mattered.

Crusher shook her head, “I never knew doctors as dedicated as the Bolians. They sacrifice twenty to forty years at the end of their lives to have that implant, just so that they never have to worry about breaking a quarantine. That’s dedication.”

“The Bolian high command only deploys doctors who have volunteered to have the auto-immune implant, so all of the hostages must be carriers. Captain, I believe that we can use these implants to rescue the hostages.”

There was silence all around, for although they had struggled to figure out Data’s point, it was difficult to see how this could help anyone but a sick Bolian. Picard sat up in his chair, “How?”

Data felt that weight again, strangely where his stomach would be, “The implants operate on a low radio wavelength, something that few shielding systems block. I believe that we can not only remotely activate the implants, but issue them specific commands as well.”

There was a short silence as Picard’s brow furrowed, almost suspicious, “To what end?”

Data rested his eyes on the table for only a moment. He had considered other plans, dozens of other plans, but that was the torment of hostage situations. Doing anything could get the hostages killed. Doing nothing could them killed. And this plan of his could most certainly get them killed. “To make the crew ill, Captian.” Data said quickly, simply, “To make them extremely ill.”
Chapter 35

“I could get used to this.”

Lore dropped another log onto the fire and watched the flames lick around it. The campfire was high and entrenched now, putting off warmth that would last till dawn at least. But just in case, Lore grabbed another low hanging branch with one hand and tore it down with a frightening crack. He looked over his shoulder again, as he had at least a dozen times in the last ten minutes, but still Anna did not look anywhere close to waking. She had stirred several times, groaning in pain, and he had been tempted to use the one and only vial of painkillers that they had, but he resisted. She would need it far more when she was fully awake.

The fire cracked and snapped loudly, for the only wood in the immediate area was of a sappy, pine-like quality. It released a pleasantly sweet smell that, luckily for Anna, seemed to be a natural insect repellent. Lore walked a few yards toward the thicker tree line and looked out over the valley below. If they were to be followed, the pursuers would have no choice but to come the same way that he had, and now he scanned every pitch black void for the slightest glimmer of light. Only the moon reflecting off a far off stream pierced the black. As he looked and listened, dread forced its way through him like a wind into a sail. If Reed did come it would be highly unlikely that he would come alone, and despite all Lore’s speed and strength it might not be enough to save Anna and himself.

I’m sorry, Anna. This is all my fault. He traced his fingers over the crooked lines of the tree bark with an absent look. It had been his idea to leave the Enterprise for some stupid errand. Yes, it had been primarily to have Anna alone, but he had to admit to himself that he wanted his old ship. He wanted it because…he couldn’t decide why he had wanted the damn thing! It was true that he did not wish to leave the Enterprise, but something about the possibility that he could had intrigued him so. As devastating as almost all of his memories of his old life were, he could at least still savor the fact that he had been completely free to come and go as he pleased, whenever he pleased. The potential for such a feeling again had grabbed him the moment he heard the word Martzy. If only he had considered the possible danger. If only he had been smart enough to go alone.

But what freedom is this? Hiding from a human! He pushed himself away from the tree, angry and worried at once, and looked back toward the fire.

Anna was staring at him.

Oh! He bounded down from the low hill and was at her side in an instant. “Don’t move so much.” He whispered quickly, for she had already placed her hands on the ground as if she meant to rise. “I don’t know how else you might be injured.”

Anna clenched and opened her eyes several times, as if she could not get them to focus. Finally, she took in a long view of the dark forest that surrounded them. Her face was still frightfully pale, and mild shadows had formed under eyes. For Lore it still changed nothing. She was still so beautiful.

“How do you feel?” He asked.
Anna tilted her head back to look up, but the motion was just the trigger she needed. She leaned forward in a painful gasp and tried to press her hand to her head. “Oh, God!” She gasped again, “My head….”

Lore grabbed her wrist before she had a chance to disturb her bandages. “No. Don’t touch it. The wound is still open.” He guided her wrist back to her side and reached around her to grab the cloth bag he had brought.

“What…happened?” She said between sharp, painful breaths. “Where are we?”

“Martzy Prime. I had to make an emergency landing.” He pulled the hypo-spray and the vial from the bag. Pressing them together, he gently brushed the hair away from her neck and placed his hand against her cheek, “Be still.”

Anna cringed as the hypo-spray hissed, but only a moment later she drew a full breath and closed her eyes. “Thanks. It’s better.” Opening her eyes again, she took another look at the surroundings and the fire. Eventually she looked at her own hands and the long black sleeves that reached a few inches past her fingertips. In fact, she took a moment too look down at herself and see the thick black sweater floating around her small frame.

Lore shifted his eyes wearily. Somehow he had not thought of embarrassment when he had taken off his sweater and fitted it onto her hours ago. He had only thought that the temperature was falling and that hypothermia was the last thing she needed. Now, naked from the waist up and with no alternative, he felt a little foolish.

“Thank you.” She smiled and hugged herself against the cold. She continued to look up at him, her eyes fixed on his in a most unabashed way. “Where’s the shuttle? How did we get here?”

It took a moment for him to register her question. He had been too much off guard by the undeterred way in which she looked at him. “We were being pursued and had to leave the shuttle. I don’t know if Reed or his men survived their landing. We could have been followed.”

She nodded slowly, accepting the information while not liking it at all. “I must have hit my head pretty hard. I don’t remember the descent or leaving the shuttle.”

Lore’s face alighted with a pleased smile that he could not resist. “You shouldn’t remember. You weren’t awake. I carried you here.”

It was just what he wanted to see. Anna’s pale cheeks turned a peachy hue, the best she could do under the circumstances. She lowered her eyes finally and looked off into the fire. “Tell me everything that happened. What do we do from here?”

Lore seated himself on the ground, facing her, and tried to decide how to put it. The details of the crash were simple enough. He told her that they had been attacked by Reed and another of the Corona Six shuttles, a fact she could not remember in the slightest, and that they had been hit several times before she crashed into the viewport and lost consciousness. It would have been easy to simply stick to the facts of the events, but something was pushing him. He didn’t want her to know just what he had done, he wanted her to know why he had done it.

“I thought about giving myself up to stop the attack, but I was sure he would kill you anyway.” He wanted to reach out and take her hands, but he resisted the temptation.

Anna’s lips parted and she starred up at him with wide eyes. “You wouldn’t have really turned yourself over to Reed, would you? He would have killed you.”
He shrugged, “Better than killing you just to get to me. If I had believed that he would actually honor a bargain, I would have gone.”

“No!” She protested, her eyes widening in genuine alarm. “You can’t do that!”

“There’s no point in arguing about it now. It’s over. Besides, you would much rather be alive in the shuttle than dead with me.” He smiled playfully. Despite his intent to be honest, he was slipping once again into his protective façade.

“I—” She stumbled over some sudden words and shook her head. “I would have felt bad when I woke up.”

Lore pulled his hands closer to himself, resisting even more the urge to touch her in some way. “Of course you would have. But, better than being dead.”

Anna did not blink, “I would have been heartbroken.”

Oh. His careless smile faded until he was staring at her with the same kind of recklessness. Heartbroken? He said the word again in his own mind and marvelled at it. His death would have broken her heart? “I—I’m sorry. I couldn’t let you die, Anna. I don’t know what I would have done.” He saw the change in her eyes, the sudden burst of shock that caught her breath and left her speechless. He continued before she could find words, for something almost panicky seemed to be driving him, “I thought about what it would be like to go back to the Enterprise without you and…I don’t think I could. I wouldn’t have. There wouldn’t be anything there for me.”

Anna hugged herself again and drew her knees up to her chest. She clenched her eyes tight for only a moment before she darted them up again, “You know, this is all your fault.”

If it was possible for a machine to know the sensation of a battering ram, this was it. Lore sank into the ground.

“If I had just stayed mad at you, I wouldn’t have joined you in the shuttle.” Anna continued, smiling, “But I can’t stay angry at you. I hope you’re happy. Now I’m going to miss my holodeck reservation.”

Lore smiled in amazement and laughed, “Don’t you ever get upset about anything? We’re stranded, Anna. I have one plan that might—might—get us out of here, and if that doesn’t work we have to wait and hope that the Enterprise comes back for us. We have no idea what they’re situation is now.”

“I know, Lore.” She sighed heavily, but the smile was still there. “What is your plan that might get us out of here?”

As much as he wanted to just sit and talk to her about other things, their situation didn’t allow for the luxury. He told her quickly about the unique electromagnetic field that surrounded Martzy Prime and of how it had made their landing more like a crash. “Nothing that requires a stable power matrix can last here for more than a few minutes without particular alterations. That’s why we have no communicators and why…” He reached up and ran his fingers very lightly over her cotton bandages, “…we have no medical supplies.”

The blood ran from Anna’s face and she looked at him, aghast, “But—How long can you be here?”

He couldn’t help but be heartened by the concern in her voice. It genuinely thrilled him! But, her concern was misplaced, which led him to smile. “I have a micro-dilithium core with a ten
thousand year half life. Even at this rate, it would take this planet a hundred years to kill me.”

Anna blushed, but for what reason he could not tell. She continued, “What are we going to do?”

“We lost the port nacelle during our descent. We don’t have any means to track it, but I noted it’s trajectory before the crash.”

Anna’s sat up, “The backup comms! The power supply and manual command box are both in the port nacelle.”

“Exactly. If it isn’t too heavily damaged, I can use it to remotely access the commands on my ship and transport us aboard. It’s ideal that we get there before the moon’s orbit passes our current position, otherwise we will have to wait another thirty-six hours for our next window.”

Anna narrowed her eyes while a mischievous smile played on her lips. “I win.”

“You win what?” He countered.

“You ship. You just mentioned that you had a ship. I knew it must be something good.” Her smile widened further as she enjoyed her small victory. “What kind of ship?”

“Oh, no. I’m still keeping some mystery in this, for my own amusement.” He took her hands in his and stood, pulling her up with him. “Let’s go.”

Anna blinked, “Shouldn’t we wait till morning?”

“That will be in fourteen hours.” He reminded her. “We can’t wait that long.”

Anna sighed, clearly still groggy from her ordeal. After all, they had not treated her injuries, only the symptoms. “Lead the way.”

Lore bent down next to the fire and began scooping the moist black soil onto the embers. The fire died quickly, sending the forest into utter darkness. He gathered the bag and what few useful things remained in it, and came to Anna’s side. He wanted to lift her up into his arms again, if not wholly for her comfort than at least for his own, but now that she was actually awake he thought twice on it.

“How far are we from the nacelle?” Anna asked as she began the awkward descent down the hill.

“Six point three kilometers.” He replied.

Anna leaned against a tree and sighed for a short moment before doggedly continuing her descent. Lore watched her carefully as they made their way down the rough, forested hillside. The moon was full, but the cloud cover was heavy and continued to block any kind of useful light from human eyes. He, however, could choose to see the world as brightly or as darkly as he wanted.

“Agh!” Anna grunted as she stumbled over an exposed root and fell back against the hillside.

“Are you all right?” He asked as he took both her hands and pulled her up.

“Yes, I’m fine.” She said quickly, dusting the leaves from her backside. “Were you able to get any reading on the terrain between us and the nacelle before we crashed?”

He could see the small bit of hope in her expression, but he could not satisfy it. “Every indication is that it’s all exactly like this.”
“Great. It reminds me of Idaho.” She muttered and continued on. Lore moved a few steps ahead of her, ready to be her net should she fall forward. After a few minutes they reached the bottom of the small hill and their feet sloshed into the smooth rock bed of a shallow creak.

“Lore?” Anna whispered, looking up at him. “This is going to sound ridiculous, but how the hell are you not cold?”

Lore smiled at the rhetorical question but felt more profoundly his own exposure. How odd it was to care about such a thing. After all, what was modesty but some ridiculous human concept? Still, he found himself wondering about her thoughts. “I’m freezing. You just can’t tell.”

“Mmm.” She looked at him sideways for a moment, but her smile faded under heavier thoughts. “Thank you, Lore, for everything. You know, this makes the third time you’ve saved my life.”

He shrugged his shoulders as best he could, but what a futile show! “Too bad I can’t say the act was completely selfless. It wasn’t.” He glanced down at her meaningfully, half hoping that she did not see the meaning, but what was he hiding? Had he not allowed himself to slip so many times already?

Anna hugged herself against the cold as they moved slowly through the ankle-deep water. As soon as they made the far bank, she looked up again, “Did you mean what you said? About not going back to the Enterprise if something happened to me?”

“Yes.” He said instantly, his voice low. He could not think of how any answer to that could be playful or guarded. He was running out of ideas.

Anna stopped. “Why? It’s your home now.”

_You are my home._ He waited for her to reach his side again, but instead of answering the question, he swiped his left arm behind her knees while simultaneous catching her with his right. She cried out from shock and fixed her arms around his neck as if she would fall, but he held her easily and securely against him.

“Ah! Lore!” She laughed and tried to sit up as if he would put her down right away, but when he did not she looked up at the sky with flushed cheeks. “I can walk, you know.”

“You can swim too, but I don’t recommend it.” He said as he left the soft mud of the creek bed and moved into the dark forest. His pace was fast, just less than a jog, but far more than Anna would have been capable of under the circumstances. “We will never make it in time if you walk.”

It was a lie, of course. At Anna’s rate, they would have reached the site still with two hours to spare.

“Um…” Anna struggled for words and composure, still clinging to his neck tensely. “Can you see?”

“Perfectly.” He replied, glad that she was not objecting. “Don’t worry.” The forest was reasonably level for a short distance, but the descent continued soon again. This time it was not so steep and covered with trees, but sharp boulders jutted from the hillside here and there, some completely covered in slick moss. He was glad he had decided to carry her. Moving down the hill sideways, but still at the same smooth, fast pace, he noticed that Anna’s body had relaxed. She still held her arms around his neck, but she had allowed her head to rest on the inside of his shoulder, and her legs were comfortably slack. He smiled, “Are you alright with this?”

“Being personally chauffeured? I think I could get used to this.” She said with a laugh.
Lore stepped to the edge of a sharp boulder and jumped the short distance to the ground. Anna gasped and instinctively tightened her hold. “Don’t be afraid.” Lore said, “I won’t drop you.”

Anna relaxed again, more quickly than Lore would have expected, and she rested her head back against his shoulder. “I know. I trust you.”

He smiled, sure that she was not looking up at him, and continued his steady pace. He was not surprised when she said nothing further, but he was surprised an hour later when he said her name and received no response. She was sound asleep. Her arms had long since fallen into her lap, and her cheek rested against his chest and shoulder. A wonderful feeling washed over him and he wanted so desperately to wake her and hear the sound of her voice. But he did not need her to say again that she trusted him. Her closed eyes were all the proof he needed.

***

One Hour Earlier

Reed pressed his body to the moist ground and stared with unblinking eyes through the screen of underbrush. His heart thumped so violently that he wondered if Lore could hear it over the expanse of the narrow valley. He remained utterly still, hardly wishing to breathe as he stared in unmoving rage at the marble statue before him. Across the ravine, no more than a hundred yards at most, Lore stood next to a tree with a sentinel’s pose, his gold eyes trailing over the forest like a hawk. At least Reed imagined those gold eyes, for in the darkness he could only make out the bare white-gold skin of the android’s chest and arms, like one of those unpainted Roman statues left in the forest.

*But why does he go undressed?* Reed gritted his teeth like a caged animal. He didn’t care. He only cared about the target he saw and that it was now more accessible for its own mistakes. He reached slowly—very slowly—to his side and pulled his disruptor from the holster. With one hand he popped open the panel at the bottom of the handle and turned the power core to lock it into the place. As the weapon began to draw power, he knew he would have only moments before the EM field killed it. He would get one shot, maybe two.

“Don’t.” Buel whispered from behind him. It was the quietest sound, barely a breath, but it grated on Reed like a bark.

He flashed his eyes at her dangerously.

“You’ll never make it.” She whispered again, just as quietly. “He’ll move before the blast reaches him…Have to be closer.”

Reed gripped the weapon so tightly that the casing began to pop and strain. He knew she was right, knew it and hated it, but the weapon was the only recourse they had. Without the disruptor, there would be no killing Lore. There would be no escaping him either.

“There’s a fire.” Klar whispered, so quietly that it was mostly from reading his lips that the others understood him. “The human must be with him, and alive.”

Reed sneered. It didn’t matter. What would some human matter! In fact, it might work to his
advantage. Perhaps this human would slow him down, distract him in some way. He nodded, “If
he’s helping this human survive, it must be to his benefit. Perhaps if she dies, his position with
Starfleet will be damaged somehow.” His own words disgusted him. Damaged! Starfleet should
have killed that thing years ago. Where was their precious Starfleet justice then! He turned his eyes
back to the narrow slits of light and scanned the opposing hillside, but the bright statue was gone.
A plume of grey smoke rose through the trees and into the moonlight, signaling that the campfire
had been extinguished.

Damnit! Reed disconnected his disruptor’s power core and shoved it back into the holster.
“Come on.” He bounded down the hillside at a fevered pace with Buel and Klar fast behind him.
As he thrust the branches out of his way and clawed for any hold, he could not deny the possibility
that he was running head long to his own death. If so, he would make sure that he would not be
going alone.
"You deserve this plague!"

“I’m sure he’s still alive. Lore is too stubborn to die.”

Data looked up with a start, his expression a mix of outrage and embarrassment, but Troi did not appear put off. How could she, when she already knew what he was feeling?

“Survival is not always in our own hands, Counselor. It is very likely that Lore’s stubbornness will not help him.” Data replied. He was sure to keep his voice even, almost monotone, like the days before his emotion chip. But it felt strange to force such a thing, as if he were mocking his former self.

Troi sighed, for the most difficult thing about being an empath among humans was the need to constantly pretend she was not one. She would have to ask questions to which she already knew the answers, and feign belief when the answers were lies. No one wished to be an open book. “You’re worried about Lore. I can understand if that isn’t pleasant.”

“It is not.” Data retorted, yanking a section of isolinear cable from the open console with more force than necessary.

Troi was silent. It was so rare to see Data exhibit physical manifestations of his feelings, but frustration was one of the most potent of emotions. She thought it best to change the subject. “Have you and Beverly decided?”

Right on cue, Beverly Crusher came to the opposite side the bio-bed with a hypospray vial in her hand. She looked over the bed, now scattered with the various engineering components that had been used to modify the sickbay computer for their task, and sighed. “I still don’t like this, Data. You know why.”

Data nodded somberly, for he truly did understand her objections. As a doctor, it was her duty and oath to do no harm, but he could see another side to the argument as well. “If Reed succeeds in killing Lore, his men will no longer have a reason to hold us here and the hostages will no longer have value. Considering the risks involved, I do not believe it would be in their best interest to return the hostages. They will kill them.”

Troi had to agree. Not because her empathic abilities told her so, but because her own sense of logic did. “He’s right. They would have to lower their shields to transport the hostages over, and that crew is on edge already. I don’t think they will risk it.”

Crusher nodded, for she already knew that, and handed Data the vial. He inserted it into the side of the modified bio-bed computer and waited.

“What is it?” Troi asked.

Data was somber. “In order for the crew to be incapacitated, we had to isolate a disease that would not only affect every species aboard, but which they would not be able to cure by their own means.” He glanced wearily at Crusher. “Smallpox.”
Troi was not familiar with it.

“It was a highly infectious disease on Earth centuries ago. Through inoculations, it was eradicated in the second half of the twentieth century, so…” She shook her head, “they should have no idea what’s hitting them.”

Data felt a pang of guilt pressed against him like a closing wall, but he knew this was their only option. Reed had been too smart, too thorough. They had nothing else. “There is one human aboard, however, and since all people born on Earth are still inoculated with the smallpox vaccine, there is a possibility that one member of Reed’s crew will go unaffected.”

Troi tried to ignore the frustration and guilt that raged through her old friend, for it would do him no good to have it advertised. “But the Bolians will remain unaffected? After all, that is the purpose of their implants, isn’t it?”

“No.” Crusher folded her arms across her chest. “Smallpox has an incubation period of twelve days in humans, and since we don’t have that kind of time we’ve made some genetic modifications to the virus. The Bolian implants contain all the information for making the smallpox anti-body, but anti-bodies in large amounts are basically no better than the virus itself. If we can override the restrictions in the implants, we can use the anti-body genetic code to recreate the virus itself. Since the Bolians will be the source of the virus, their anti-bodies will not keep them from becoming ill.”

Data pressed his combadge. “Data to bridge. Captain, we are prepared to emit the signal in the lowest band range. Their shields should not be able to filter it.” He forced his voice to be calm, but it was too much. His fear for Lore, his anger at feeling that fear, and now the possibility that he may directly be responsible for deaths; it was all becoming too much.


“I hope this works.” Crusher said, “I hope they don’t try to hold out too long. If they do, there won’t be any helping them.”

Troi looked at both of them, “How long before they begin feeling the effects?”

Data spoke first, “The first symptoms should appear within an hour, with the contagious stage following almost immediately. The final stages of infection will culminate in three to four hours without treatment. At that stage, the fatality rate among humans is thirty-five percent. But, among non-humans, perhaps higher.” His voice was calm, pleasantly mellow as if he were discussing the program at a symphony. Troi stared at him, for he had deactivated his emotion chip.

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On the dim, mismatched bridge of Reed’s ship, Andrew Conner sat on the small flight of steps on the port side and rubbed at his weary eyes. It had been more than fourteen hours since Reed and the others had set out to kill the android, and he had been awake for at least twenty hours before that. How long did it take to kill a machine, anyway? Thinking on it now, he stretched his neck to look at the console screen nearby. Reed had still sent no communication, which was troubling him. Perhaps the android had won after all. Perhaps Reed and Buel and Klar had met their ends just like Reed’s wife.

Conner shuddered. He wished Buel had never told him the whole damned story! He had seen
enough photos and holodeck simulations to imagine how terrifying it must have been to be so close to a Borg, and because of this little insight he found himself rooting for Reed’s successs.

*But not like this.* He used his toe to nudge the small pile of tricorders at his feet. They were among the items he had taken from the Bolian’s medical kits before handing them over. Conner knew he was probably going to get flack for that, but if Reed got his revenge maybe he would go back to the way he had been. The guy had always been a little stoic, but things had gotten out of hand recently. After the accident at the Corona Six station—if those damned scientists had just left when they were supposed to!—things had taken a bad turn. Had he really intended to destroy the *Enterprise* just to get to one person? Just to get to one machine? Conner grunted and kicked at the little devices until they scattered. He didn’t want to do this. He didn’t want to be part of any of it! The money was enticing—more than enticing—but he was no longer sure if he could go through with everything Reed wanted. Despite what he had told Reed, he had no intention of executing the Bolians. But how could he avoid it? Reed had been explicit about the fate of the hostages.

As if things weren’t bad enough, he could swear he was coming down with something.

He pulled himself to his feet, unusually weary at the task, and headed toward the door. If the Bolians had finished treating their injured, he saw no reason to let them keep the medical kits any longer.

“Tolen,” Conner called to the Farian crewman up ahead, “tell Brishek I want to send another coded message to Reed. Have him meet me on the bridge.”

The crewman stopped and leaned against the bulked. He only looked up when Conner reached his side. “Eh…yeah. I think he’s still in the brig. I’ll…tell him.”

Conner stopped and looked down at the man, for the corridors were so dark it was often hard to see much of anything, but when the man looked up his face glistened with perspiration and his skin had taken on the grayish-white hue of cheap paper. “What’s wrong with you? You look like you’re gonna die.”

Tolen frowned and pulled his rifle strap more firmly over his shoulder. “I’m fine! I’m just…I must have picked up something from that last station.”

Conner took a step back, but was not too alarmed. Farians had a bizarre penchant for becoming ill, as their bodies did not permanently retain anti-body DNA like most other species. He rolled his eyes, “Go and sleep. To hell with this ‘stay awake’ order. You just came off the watch, right?”

Tolen nodded and braced his hand on the wall, “Yeah, I just left the brig. The Bolians are mostly asleep.”

“You left the brig? I’d do the same if I were you.”

Tolen nodded and turned away, “Right…Think I’ll get something to eat first.”

Conner watched as the man stumbled off at a snail’s pace. As if they didn’t have enough problems, now all the Farians were probably going to fall ill. He couldn’t understand why Reed hired them anyway. It was like getting paper dolls to fill the role of statues. He made his way to the brig without encountering another soul.

“Lower the force field.” He said the moment his feet cleared the door. “I want to get those med kits back before they start getting clever.”

When there was not an immediate rush to fill his order, he looked to the control station across
the room. Seated at the desk, with his head resting in his crossed arms, was Brishek. No one could mistake such a beastly, disheveled frame.

“Brishek!” Conner shouted. When the man did not move, he stormed across the room and shoved his head brutally. “Are you asleep? You must be out of your m—” Conner pulled his hand back, for the force of his assault only made the wheeled chair move away from the desk. Brishek slid away with it and tumbled to the side. He fell on the floor in a heap, his wide eyes staring up.

“Ah!” Conner jumped back and the blood drained from his face. Brishek’s clammy, sweat-soaked face was even more grotesque than usual, for his leathery brown skin was covered with inflamed pea-size pustules. Conner reached down to check his pulse, but pulled back instinctively. The man was dead. There was no question of it. “What the hell is this!”

A painful moan drew his eyes to the holding cell, where only more horror awaited him. The Bolians were scattered in bizarre contortions, as if they had grown so exhausted that they no longer had the strength to arrange themselves comfortably. A few lay on their sides on the floor, their arms flung out over their heads as if they had been crawling. Still others rested against the far wall with their heads flopped against the shoulders of their neighbors. Their chests heaved for frantic, shallow breaths, but Conner could barely notice that beyond the inflamed red blisters that covered each of them. Against their blue skin and bald heads, the marks looked even more brutal.

He backed toward the door as panic began to consume him. He searched for solutions and could not even identify the problem. “You! Frill! What’s wrong with you? What’s going on?”

From his place in the corner Captain Frill only barely opened his eyes. “I don’t…know.” He breathed. “It happened so…eh…fast!”

Conner shook his head and looked down at Brishek again. He could swear he had seen this before, but not in person. No, that would have been seared into his mind. It must have been photos, or a holonovel—“No. You’re doctors. You did this! Is this how you plan to escape, Frill? Huh? Poison us all so we’ll cave to the Enterprise!”

Frill groaned and turned his face into the corner. “You fools! You’re the ones who ransacked a medical vessel! What did you open? What...what vials did you smash when you were robbing us?”

With his last ounce of strength, he turned his eyes on Conner and gritted his bright white teeth, “You...traitor! Treacherous human! You turn your back on your own kind! You deserve this...this plague!”

Conner struggled to breathe as he watched Frill lay his head against the wall and close his eyes. No, no! He needed the doctors. He needed them to do something! “Frill! Wakeup! I—I have most of your equipment. You can use it to find out what this is. Frill? Frill!”

The Captain breathed, but he did not move. It was too late for that.

“No!” Conner rushed to the wall and pressed the comm, his sweaty fingers sliding around the button, “All hands! The brig is under strict quarantine! Repeat, no one enter the brig!” He let his hand fall, and for nearly a minute he listened only to the panic of his own breathing. The fatigue and worry that he had kept at bay for days crashed down on him all at once, and he felt suddenly as if he would no longer be able to even stand. Panicked, he dropped his phaser and pushed his sleeves up to his elbows to examine them. There were no red marks, but that could change.

The comm beeped, startling him out of his skin. It wasn’t like him to be like this. He had always been so calm, so collected. That was why Reed had taken him on, despite the fact that he was human. But this wasn’t a battle with armed soldiers or agents from the Orion syndicate. There was
no one to target here. There was nothing his speed or his phaser could do for him.

He pressed the comm.

“Conner! What’s this quarantine? What’s going on down there?”

“Just stay away from here! The Bolians have done something. Poisoned themselves, I don’t know. Brishek is dead and Tol—” His throat closed like a vice and he felt truly as if he would be sick. He knelt down and retrieved his phaser. “Find Tolen! Now!”

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“Captain.” Worf said from his place at tactical. It was the first voice to dent the silence in nearly an hour. “I am reading forty-one life signs aboard Reed’s vessel. Down from forty-two.”

Troi glanced at Data for any reaction, but his emotion chip remained inactive.

Picard nodded somberly, “Any way to tell whom, Commander?”

Worf tried the console, but there was no luck, “No, sir. The interference from their shields is blocking a more detailed scan.”

Troi shook her head. She did not have the ambiguity that they did. “I’m sensing a great deal of hostility and panic, Captain. Far greater than before. I think it’s working.”

“Do you believe they will call us for help?” Picard asked, though he already thought he knew the answer.

Troi shook her head, “I’m not sure.”

“All right.” He leaned back in his seat, “Hail them.”

“Channel open, Sir.” Worf said.

Picard considered for a second, for even though they held the upper hand now it was still a negotiation. The tables could turn on a dime. “Crew of the pirate vessel,” Picard said slowly, “We would like to discuss your options at this time. Please respond.”

Silence followed as they watched the vessel hang in front of them.

“Pirate vessel, please respond or —”

“Or what!” Came the frantic reply. The starscape vanished from the screen, replaced by the dim interior of some control room. But the room could hardly be seen beyond the angry face that starred back at him. The man, human by all appearances, hovered close to the screen as if he leaning over it. “What, Picard! You’ll unleash the black plague? Or how about the ebola virus? Don’t deny this is your doing!”

Picard stood and smoothed the front of his uniform. Calm was going to win this. It was a weapon the hostage takers no longer had. “If you require medical assistance, I’m sure we can make some arrangement.”
“Damn Starfleet!” The man slammed his fists on the console and trembled, his young face looking old for all that strained behind it. “Damned self-righteous hypocrites! This is biological warfare, Picard. You—you can’t do this!”

The man was truly afraid, and Picard did not need Troi to tell him that. As he examined his close face, he saw no red marks. Still, he knew the man had reason to be afraid. “Have you noticed, Mr. Conner, that you are not ill? I’m sure your shipmates will find that very interesting. It will certainly seem odd to them that you and only you are unaffected.”

Conner’s eyes flamed wide, “You think you’re going to frame me? Don’t! Don’t push me, Starfleet! I have twenty-three reasons why you had better send a cure over here and do it now!”

Picard was nonplussed, “No. By our count, you have forty-one reasons.”

“Agh!” The man reached off screen and grabbed something. A moment later, he held a phaser toward the screen, “I swear, I swear! I will start executing those prisoners if you don’t fix this now!”

Picard hesitated. He had expected anger, manipulation, but this man was nearly beside himself with fear, and fear made people irrational. Still, he couldn’t let the façade drop. He had to maintain that they were as heartless and cold as this man believed them to be. “We infected the Bolians with the same illness, Mr. Conner. Now, we would like to get them back, but if you want to make that difficult I suppose we can manage without them. And you. How long will you be able to operate that vessel once every member of your crew is dead?” Picard bristled inside, and hoped he never had to see a playback of what he had just done.

Conner dropped his head into his hands and pulled at his short brown hair. “Half. Send over enough cure doses for my crew, and I’ll give you half of the Bolian hostages.”

Troi shifted in her seat, just enough to make Picard notice her. “I don’t think so.”

Conner closed his eyes and pressed his clenched fist under his nose, “How do I know you won’t just leave us to die as soon as you have the Bolians? I want the cure first.”

Picard pursed his lips. How many times had he been in this bargaining situation? It was never easy. It required at least one of the parties to be honest. “You have more reason to trust us than we have to trust you. You will allow us to transport all of the hostages, or there is no deal.”

“I want the cure at the same time. No tricks, Picard! Through the same transporter beam!”

Picard glanced down at Troi, and the small close of her eyes indicated that he could move forward. He turned back to the screen. “Prepare the hostages. You have five minutes.” He gave Worf the cut-off signal.

“I don’t sense any deception, Captain.” Troi said at once, for she could hardly believe it herself.

Riker seemed unconvinced. “After all this effort, I should think they would still try something to keep us here. I don’t like it. It feels like they’re caving too easily.”

“Not they, just him. I couldn’t be sure before, but now I’m convinced that this man who seems to be running the ship right now, he never had any intention of harming the hostages. He would have found some way to get them to us when they were no longer needed.” She glanced at Data, who had turned in his seat to face them.
“I believe my plan was in error.” Data said in a low voice, “The death on Reed’s ship could have been avoided.”

Troi felt Data’s regret like a knot in her stomach. She had to tell him to stop suddenly reactivating his emotion chip around her. “You don’t know that, Data. Just because he had no intent doesn’t mean the others didn’t. Reed certainly had the intent.”

Data only nodded and stood, “Captain, permission to assist Dr. Crusher?”

Picard nodded.

Data escaped to the turbo-lift as quickly as decorum could carry him, and frowned painfully the moment the doors closed. Why he had reactivated his emotion chip, he could not be sure, but he knew it had something to do with regret. He had promised himself a long time ago that he would only deactivate his emotion chip for emergencies, when others were relying on his unwaveringly cool head, but he had collapsed under the strain. He knew his decision had been logical, the best course of action when few others had been available, but it wasn’t really that which had thrown him. It was Lore. Troi had been right, and still was. He was afraid that his brother had already been killed.

When he entered sickbay, Dr. Crusher was placing the last of the filled hyposprays into a small crate and sealing the box. She looked up at Data, “I’m including instructions and I hope they’re still level headed enough to follow them.”

Data picked up the crate before Crusher could struggle under it, and placed it in the middle of the floor. “Data to transporter room one. You may proceed.”

Crusher rushed to a side table that was also covered with rows of prepared hyposprays. She took two in her hand, as did the half dozen nurses standing by. Data hesitated before taking two as well.

“Will you do a favor for me, Data?” Crusher asked as she continued to watch the medical crate.

“Yes, Doctor.” He replied.

“Don’t make yourself feel bad about this. They didn’t leave us many options.”

“I will attempt to remind myself of that, Doctor.” He assured her, “But I have found that my emotional states do not always respond to logic.”

“Yeah.” Crusher sighed and smiled at him, “Neither do mine.”
Chapter 37

“Don’t move.”

Dawn was still an hour away, but the sky had already begun to brighten. The ground was wet with dew, softening the sound of his steps as he made it to a small clearing before the forest continuing down again at a shallow angle. The clearing was scarred, churned and tossed up as if claws had scratched at it. Up ahead he saw the splintered truck of a young tree that had been severed by some devastating impact. Lore stepped to the edge of the clearing, Anna still securely in his arms, and looked down the small incline. The shuttle’s warp nacelle lay propped up against a massive tree, half covered with dirt and severed roots.

“Anna.” He whispered, loudly enough to wake her. He walked back into the clearing and came to a patch of undisturbed grass next to a jutting boulder. He set her down gently as she began to stir. “We’ve reached the nacelle. There isn’t much time to activate the comm unit before the moon goes out of range.”

Anna threw her arm of her eyes and turned her face away, “Good. I feel awful.” She chuckled, but it was a forced sound. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and you won’t have to play nurse much longer.”

He smiled and caressed the side of her face. She pulled her arm away and stared at him in surprise.

Lore pressed his fingers to her neck quickly, the only cover he could think of. “Your pulse is weak still. You really need a blood transfusion.”

She gritted her teeth against the pain and nausea and laughed the same painful laugh, “Being human….Just my luck!”

He rolled his eyes, “Don’t feel bad. It could have happened to anyone. The nacelle is just down the embankment. The transmitter might require an access code.”

Anna smiled despite her lousy condition, “Ah, that’s right. I had to change my access codes after the Captain found out you had used them.”

“No good deed goes unpunished.’”

“Mmm. Eight-four-one-bravo-six. Good luck.”

Lore wanted to touch her again and reassure her, but he was not sure himself, “I won’t be long.”

She nodded as best she could and turned her face back into the dark shadow of the boulder. Lore looked back as she hugged his sweater around her and pulled her chilled hands into the sleeves for some comfort. If his plan did not work, if the transmitter was too badly damaged, he was not sure what he would do. He could easily wait for the Enterprise to come back, but he could see from her grey complexion and exhausted pose that Anna might not have that luxury. He turned and bounded the few meters down the hillside and skidded to a stop next to the broken nacelle. The massive thing lay half standing, for a good meter of the bottom had lodged itself into the ground. He circled around and ran his hands over the scarred surface until he found the seam. The thing
was still warm.

Lore pried off a section of the outer casing and tossed it aside. On first inspection there appeared to be no damage to the transmitter, and he set to work quickly. If the moon was still in range, he would not even have to wait for his ship to power up and leave the moon’s orbit. He and Anna would be able to transport directly to it on the moon’s surface. *If* they were still in range; *If* the transmitter worked; *If* his ship was even still there.

The transmitter hummed to life and he moved his fingers feverishly. The EM field would kill it in a matter of minutes, perhaps less, but if he could just get the signal out his ship would do the rest. Lore smiled over the tiny control panel with its pea-size buttons. *My ship….* He had not thought he would be so pleased to see it again, but the possibility of having complete freedom once more was too much to ignore. As he finished the last of the transmission details in a flurry of fingers, he wondered if Anna would feel that sense of freedom too. He wondered if perhaps she might wish to join him in seeing how far they could travel.

First thing’s first, Lore. He shook the daydream away and stepped back as the transmitter beeped slowly. The device made it through six rotations before the last beep struggled and died. Lore frowned. If everything had worked, they would know very shortly. If not, they would know that too.

With new plans already forming in his mind, Lore scaled the hill again and entered the clearing. “We won’t have much time before my ship locks—” He stopped. The grass next to the boulder lay bare, only faintly crushed blades showing where Anna had lain. He darted his eyes to the scarce trees and the direction from which they he had come, but she was not there either. “Anna!”

The breeze changed. In the soft brush of the trees he heard a muffled cry.

Lore spun around, his perfect reflexes ready, and froze in horror. At the edge of the tree line only yards away, Reed stared at him from behind cold black eyes. The man’s face was flushed and wind beaten, his eyes drawn and circled with exhaustion and rage. He held a disruptor in his left hand, but the weapon was not pointed at Lore. On the ground before Reed, Anna struggled on her knees. Her back was arched painfully as Reed pulled her up and toward him by the thick mop of her hair. Anna clutched at the back of her head with both hands, desperate to alleviate the feeling that she was being scalped.

“Don’t move!” Reed shook under his own voice and drove the barrel of his disruptor into Anna’s head.

Abject terror seized him. He looked on Anna’s flushed face, streaked with tears, and thought he might collapse. Never—never!—had he felt so frantically weak! As he stood frozen, his face only a mask of cold indifference, he racked his mind for what to do, what to say. *Don’t hurt her! Please! I give up!*

“Get on your knees! Now!” Reed ordered, the disruptor still shaking in his hand. “Put your forehead on the ground!”

Lore pushed one foot back, ready to drop to his knees if that was what it took, but he stopped. If Reed didn’t shoot Anna, she was still going to die. He came back to a stern standing position and tilted his head curiously, “‘Put my head on the ground….’ Or else what, Reed? You’ll kill the human?”

Reed’s eyes flashed and he pressed the disruptor against Anna’s head so roughly that she flinched and squirmed. “I will kill her! Now get down!”
Lore scoffed and looked away. Inside, he was raging. “Fine. Relieve me of the burden. I would have been out of her long ago if I hadn’t had to drag this flimsy creature with me. I’ll be sure to tell Picard I did my best.”

Reed’s eyes narrowed and he shifted his weight uncomfortably. “You think I won’t do it? I was willing to kill far more people than this to get to you! Murderer!”

Lore smiled and hardly flinched when he saw two more figures emerge into the view. To his right and almost behind he saw the Bajoran woman. She held a disruptor in both hands, and he could see that her fingers were positioned on the power core, ready to clip it into place as soon as she needed it. From behind Reed, a Ferengi man came barely into view, but he held no weapon.

“Agh! Ah!” Anna cried out as Reed jerked her back suddenly. He released her hair and wrapped his arm around her neck, holding her securely against him. He still held the disruptor in his other hand.

Lore still resisted the urge to strike, to lunge forward and break his miserable neck! He shrugged. “Kill her, don’t kill. Either way, I’m still going to kill you.”

Anna gasped wretchedly.

Reed turned his disruptor, giving Lore his first side view of the weapon. He held it with his thumb up and back, a strange and uncomfortably position that made little sense, except Lore could see that the back casing was open, torn off, and that the end of the power core protruded just enough to not be connected. At the ready, Reed would merely press the core with his thumb and it would be engaged.

“I am not going to tell you again.”

Lore clenched his jaw. It would take a fraction of a second for Reed to connect the disruptor’s power core, and hardly more than that for the weapon to charge. He knew he could not make it to Anna in time if Reed chose to fire. He had to do something. He had to do whatever it took to take his aim away from Anna.

“Well? Go on, Narok.” Lore laughed smugly, “I don’t recall that Borg hesitating when it killed you wife. What was her name?”

Reed’s entire body went ridged, and the veins in his neck pulsed.

“I have to admit that I’m surprised.” Lore continued, his nasty expression covering his fear. “Was it not humans who invented the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’? I guess she wasn’t very fit, was she?”

Reed raged through clenched teeth, and the whites of his eyes were red with furry. It was too much for a human or a Vulcan to bear. One last cocky smirk from Lore was enough. He gripped the side of Anna’s neck and tossed her aside like a doll before he fired.

Lore darted to his right and swung his arm out, catching the tip of Buel’s disruptor. The weapon flew out of her hands as she lunged back to escape him, but Lore was not interested in her. He crouched, ready to dodge another blast as Reed aimed again, but his odds were growing weak. Even his reflexes had a limit. Reed fired, but the blast was averted to the left as Anna swatted at his outstretched arm. Lore was shocked as Anna struggled on weak legs to strike Reed again. She had her hands gripped over his, trying desperately to control his aim, but she had nothing on his strength. He swiped his hands down with the disruptor still griped in them and struck her across the
face. As she collapsed to the side, Reed lost his grip, and the weapon disappeared into the thick underbrush.

“No!” Reed dove into the bushes as Anna tried to crawl away from him. In only half a second, Lore saw the action around him as if it had taken minutes. Buel was running to the boulder behind him, her arm outstretched for the disruptor that had fallen there. Reed had his weapon again and was picking up the power core to insert it. He had no time.

“Get down!” Lore rushed to Anna’s side and caught her in his arms as he dove over the edge of the hill. They rolled violently down the shallow ravine of black dirt and shrubs while Lore did the best he could to protect her from the fall. Before they had even come to a stop, he pulled her around the side of the nacelle and ducked behind it. They had seconds—probably not even that!—and there was no escape. Past the small landing, the mountainside continued at almost a straight fall. There was nowhere to go, and even he could not move fast enough to dodge the onslaught that was coming.

Lore closed his eyes as he listened to the sound of rushing feet coming toward them. So this was how he was going to die? Shot in the back while cowering behind a piece of equipment? No. If he was going to die, it was not going to be so miserable. He could at least do something about that. He looked down at Anna, who was ducking with her shoulder pressed against the nacelle, and placed both his hands on her cold cheeks. Gently, he pressed his forehead to hers and drew what was certain to be his last breath.

“I love you.”

The world vanished in sharp blast of green.
“I will destroy the Enterprise to kill you.”

Humans often describe death as a point of bright, blinding light. Some claim that one can move closer to the light, and the closer one gets the more inviting it becomes, until finally they disappeared into the unknowable realm of the afterlife. But, ever inconsistent, some humans are certain that death is dark. It is a starless void of cold, black, nothing. Both ideas have the possibility of truth to them, but Lore had never imagined that the afterlife could be green, and he never considered that the enveloping green would fade into bright cobalt blue. Most alarming still, he never for a moment considered that the afterlife could be a large grey room with Starfleet personnel running in every direction.

Lore looked up, his hands still on Anna’s clammy cheeks, and stared at Crusher in utter amazement. For a few seconds they were a silent island in a sea of chaos, until Crusher got over her shock and pushed her way between them.

“Get her to bio bed four! Now! Hall, can you hear me? Are you all right?”

Lore remained kneeling on the deck as two male nurses took Anna by the arms and lifted her up. Her eyes never left Lore’s face.

“Anna! Look at me!”

“I’m, eh….I’m fine.”

“You are definitely not fine.” Crusher countered. “Angela! Set up the synthesizer for two pints of B positive, and get me an ortho-graftor. I think she has a skull fracture. You still with me?”

It made sense that Crusher would ask the question, for Anna had not so much as looked at any of them. Her eyes were fixed on Lore, half closed and clouded, but still stubbornly fixed. Crusher waved her tricorder over her and shouted orders across the room. The chaotic scene was like a heavily choreographed ballet, with nurses and crew moving in every direction, and none running into the other. It was only because of the extremity of the whole thing that Lore was able to pull his eyes away from Anna and see that Nurse Ogawa was treating a young Ensign with severe plasma burns across his face. Beyond her, a junior doctor was cutting away the torn sleeve of a crewman, revealing a shoulder to elbow laceration so severe that the man’s tricep muscle was nearly falling out.

“What happened?” Lore demanded.

A young nurse bumped into him from behind, her arms loaded with med kits. He turned, hoping for a response, but he only received a startled up and down examination before she side-stepped him and continued on.

“What is wrong with you people?” Lore started toward Anna, but the deck jolted violently under his feet, sending even him onto his hands and knees.

“Agh!” Crusher gripped the bio-bed and threw her arm over Anna. “What’s wrong is that we’re
getting the hell beat out of us! And you—" Crusher balked, and gave him the same examining glance as the nurse had. "And you are the cause of it!"

Lore sneered at her. The last thing he needed was Crusher’s unwavering disgust. "Who is it?" He demanded.

"Who do you think?" Crusher countered as she pressed a hypo-spray to Anna’s neck and held her. After only a second or two, Anna’s eye rolled into the back of her head and she lost all consciousness. Crusher reached under the table and produced broad straps which she began to use to secure Anna’s still form to the table.

"What are you doing! She needs your help!" Lore rushed to Anna’s side, but Crusher stubbornly blocked his path.

"Triage, Lore, that’s what I’m doing. Anna will survive, and I have to move on to those who might not. Now unless you plan to pick up a tricorder and start treating patients, get the hell out of here!"

Lore looked back at Anna as the deck jolted and the lights flickered. He was tempted to take the ortho-grafter from the floor and treat her himself, but whatever was going on had a far greater chance of killing them all. He followed Crusher. "Who’s attacking us?"

"You can’t be serious!" Crusher scowled as she took a med kit from the floor and pushed past him, "Reed’s ship was on us less than a minute after we entered orbit. The shields failed after the first couple of shots, and every time we manage to get them back online they—"

"Reed’s ship is no match for the Enterprise!" Lore exclaimed.

Crusher slammed the med kit down, "Tell them that!"

The deck rocked again, but Lore remained still. It didn’t make sense. What could be powerful enough to take down the Enterprise shields so quickly? The few ideas he had were unlikely, and not at all pleasant. "Do you know anything about their weapons?"

Crusher pushed past him again. "Get out, Lore."

He sneered at her went to Anna’s side. He placed his hand over hers. He had done perhaps the most stupid thing he could have, but still he forced himself to let go and turn to the door. He ignored Crusher’saghast expression and turned in the direction of the bridge. If he was right in his suspicions, it was a wonder that the Enterprise had even lasted this long, and there was no time left to be indecisive. He ran into the lift and commanded it to the bridge.

"Computer, list all access terminals capable of real time subspace uplinks."

"Ops terminal one, science terminals one, two, and five; main tactical control....."

It was just as he had suspected. The only access point not on the bridge was in deflector control, six decks away. There was no time to be discreet. He pressed the comm on the wall. "Lore to Data! Respond!"

"Go ahead!" It was Data’s straining voice, calling over what must have been the living hell of the bridge.

"You have to increase power to the shields."
Lore stopped the lift, “You don’t understand. They’re absorbing the power through the shields. You’re only chance is to overload them. It will destroy their phaser banks and cause a shipwide systems failure.”

There was a pause in which the crashes and booms of the bridge came through the comm. Lore pressed his hands against the wall and closed his eyes. Trust me, Data. Just this once.

“We can not reroute enough power to the shields to produce that kind of yield unless the conduits are manually rerouted. You must go to deck five, section twenty-three alpha.”

Lore diverted the lift as quickly as he could, and flew into the corridor as soon as it stopped. He could tell that they had been under assault for some time, for the lights were completely inactive in most places, and the ceiling tiles had fallen down to create a gauntlet in the corridors. Reaching the junction room, he flung the panel aside and crawling into the dark Jefferies tube as quickly as possible. It was utterly black, and only his perfect memory of the location allowed him to navigate the cramped space. He stopped before the shield power emitters and snapped the panel locks off with ease. The dull blue light of the emitters filled the Jefferies tube. He had no communicator, and there was no wall access point here. Data was going to have to call him.

He pulled two of the power lines away from the control box and moved to hook them directly into the shield emitters. Without the controls designed to keep the shields from overloading, the bridge should be able to reroute as much power as they chose. He was working at a frantic pace, but was careful not to damage the canon plug connectors. There would be no time to repair them. He screwed the plug into place and leaned back. In the light blue of the Jefferies tube, there was nothing for him to see. He did not have the grand view on the bridge and it was a pity. He wanted to see Narok’s end.

“Data to Lore. This is an open channel. Are you ready?”

“It’s ready.” He replied. The sounds of the bridge continued to come through the comm and echo through the tube. He could hear the dull thump of feet as officers moved from station to station. As he waited for the next shot, the one that would—hopefully—destroy Reed’s ship, his thoughts turned to Anna. She was lying on a bed in sickbay, nearly bled to death.

“Hand over Lore and I will not destroy your ship.”

It was as if ice water had flooded into the room, and Lore’s newfound sensibility allowed his skin to crawl. Narok Reed’s voice filtered through the comm in a dead intonation, as if his very voice were sucking the rest of the sound from the room. Lore grinded his teeth and wished he were on the bridge. Perhaps he would have a chance to look Reed in the eye before the Enterprise destroyed him.

“Stand down your weapons!” Picard demanded, “We have no intention of surrendering.”

“I did not ask you to surrender, Picard.” Reed replied, and the distain in his voice was heavy, “I know Lore is aboard your ship and know you don’t care about him. Is he worth the lives of your crewmen?”

Lore looked up. If Reed did not fire, the overload will not work. “Go to Hell, Narok.”

There was a din of silence from the bridge. Lore’s words filtered through the open channel, and
on across the chasm to Reed’s waiting ears.

“So you would rather have nine hundred people die with you than give yourself up?” Reed replied, his voice as controlled and monotone as any Vulcan professor, “I guess Starfleet didn’t tinker with you enough."

Lore almost laughed. Almost. Was Reed trying to guilt him into giving up, when he knew full well that he would destroy the Enterprise in any case? Lore leaned back against the Jeffereie’s tube wall and looked up, as if Reed were in the room above. “Guilt is something used on those with a conscience. I’m flattered you think so highly of me.”

There was a long pause, and Lore could only imagine what was happened on the bridge and in Reed’s mind. This had to work, for if it did not he had no doubts that Reed would kill them all.

“*This is your last chance. I will destroy the Enterprise to kill you.*” His icy voice was beginning to break, and Lore smiled in relief.

“I know you will.” Lore replied, “Maybe you’ll do a better job this time, clumsy."

That was it. A second of silent hell and the ship rocked with a jolt. Lore spun over onto his and belly laced his fingers into the grates, for the floor pitched back with such speed that the inertial dampeners did nothing to alleviate it. A second blast and the pitching floor was also thrown back, sending Lore slamming to the wall of the tube. The blue lights from the open panel wavered and dropped low.

No, no! “Transfer more power!”

The lights faded down, then shot up in a near blinding blaze of white-blue light. A sharp buzz increased until it surpassed the range of human hearing and the lights exploded into a shower of sparks, sending the tube into darkness. The ship was still.

“*Lay in a pursuit course!*” Picard ordered.

“The overload disabled thirty percent of the inertial dampening system.” Data replied, “We cannot go to warp.”

Lore rolled over onto his back, “You can’t let him escape!”

There was a short pause, then, “I *am sorry, Lore. He is*—”

“Yeah, I know.” Lore sighed and covered his face with his hands, “He’s gone.”

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“This is your fault, Vulcan! Human!” Klar shouted from behind clenched, meaty fists. “We never should have followed him to the surface! We never should have…have…we never should have listened to you!”

Narok Reed stepped down from the transporter pad and moved through the throng of people as if they were not there. It was like parting water is a still river, only the waves were there, hidden, ready to swallow him at any moment.
“Where is Brishek?” Buel said as she too stepped down from the pad.

Reed snorted to himself as he went directly to the locker on the far wall and began rifling through its contents. Buel and Brishek were not friends, and never had been, but they both had the mutinous streak about them. Perhaps Buel had decided it was time to get rid of their fair captain.

“He’s dead.” Conner said. His voice rang out from the corner behind the transporter pad. He leaned there with his arms folded across his chest and his eyes on the floor. “The Enterprise crew killed him!”

“Do you see this!” One of the Farian men stepped in front of Buel and pulled his sleeve up to his elbow. The pale skin was crusted over with fading pox marks, “I didn’t agree to this! You said this would be easy!”

Reed glanced back, barely interested, and almost laughed. The ship he had taken during his escape from Ohniaka III had been equipped with some very interested and ingenious advances to weapons technology. It really didn’t surprise him that Lore would be familiar with them. “You should have destroyed the Enterprise on route.”

“Did you know they would do this!” The same Farian shouted. His hand hovered ominously over the phaser rifle slung in front of him. “You said they wouldn’t protect this machine! You said they wouldn’t bother!”

Reed hardly heard the man. The waves were rising up, but the wind was still calm, and through the silence he could hear that cold voice again. But it wasn’t so cold. It was different this time, and he heard it say something that he could never have imagined it would say. Had he imagined it? Had Lore really said that?

“Have you gone mad! Are you even listening to us!” Klar shouted again. His fleshy face had gone pink with rage, a sight most were not accustomed to seeing. Ferengi were far more likely to be afraid than angry. “You almost got us killed, and for what? Money’s not worth anything if you’re dead! And how are we going to do business now, huh? Every ship in the sector will know this vessel in an hour. We’ll be hunted like wild beasts!”

“He did say it.” Reed muttered to himself, shaking his head. He listened again, closing his eyes so that he could see once more exactly what had happened. He had been coming down the hill so fast that he almost fell forward. Lore and the woman had been behind the damaged nacelle. As he remembered it now, the same rush came back to him and his heart leaped. The nacelle had blocked his first shot, his second, there had been no getting through. Coming around the nacelle, nearly throwing himself, he had had his shot. It was perfectly, directly on target. Not even Lore could have escaped such close aim, but Lore had not even tried to escape. In that fraction of second, for it could not have been more than that, Reed had hesitated at what he saw. He had been caught off guard by Lore’s stillness, for the machine had not even looked at him. His eyes had been too focused on the women before him. He had said something to her….

“I say we don’t need you anymore!” The Farian burst forth and looked to all his compatriots for the support he needed. Their mumbled agreements were soft, but adequate. “You’ve already cost us one. How many more until your ridiculous vendetta is settled? We could have all been killed!”

Reed took a power module from the locker and paused. He did say it. My God, he did!

“He loves that woman.”

“He’s lost his mind!” Klar stomped his feet like a child. “I can’t do this anymore. I…I won’t!”
“I don’t believe it!” Reed covered his eyes for a moment as he turned and began to laugh. Could this really be happening? Could he be this lucky? Was the universe really this perfect? “He loves that human!” With one more delighted laugh, Reed clicked a fresh power module into the bottom of his disrupter and fired.

The room exploded into chaotic shouts as the Farian guard fell back, his eyes rolling back into his head in the final spasm of death. Klar scrambled behind the transporter console as other guards pulled their rifles to the ready.

“He’s a madman! Kill him!” Another Farian shouted as he took aim and fired.

The blast dissipated across an invisible wall, like water striking a window. Reed stood behind the glistening, green tinted force field, another nice bit of technology he had adopted from the Borg. Buel jumped back until her back pressed against the bulked, for she knew what she had just seen but could not believe it. Anyone but Reed—anyone!—would have something like that.

“That’s Borg technology!” Someone shouted from the throng. The crunch of metal indicated that a maintenance hatch was being pried from the far wall, and crewmen were scrambling to escape.

Reed side stepped to the panel near the door, “So is this.” He muttered as he pressed a few controls. The light of so many transporter beams was so bright that Buel had to throw her arm over her eyes at the sight. Terrified shouts were instantly muffled as their sources vanished from the room. She waited, sure that she would hear them again once they rematerialized, but only silence followed. When she pulled her arm down, slowly, she was amazed to find that she remained in the dark transporter room. Too her left Reed still stood with his hand on the panel, to her right, Conner stared in slack-jawed horror.

“What—What did you do? Where are they?” Buel whispered.

Reed turned to her and tilted his head curiously. Where was the over-blown hostility? Where was Buel’s constant stain of defiance and intimidation? “It doesn’t matter. We have work to do.” He turned as if to leave, but Conner leapt forward across the pad, almost falling to his knees.

“Come on, Narok! What’s going on!”

Reed sighed as he turned back. He had always liked Conner, as much as anyone can like a liar and thief. The boy was young and stupid and involved in their enterprises for all the wrong reasons. Still, Conner was a useful person.

“Don’t worry yourself, Conner, Buel. Unlike the others, you too have always been useful.” Reed took note of Buel’s sudden shudder as she backed away once more. She had every reason, didn’t she, for they had never been on good terms. “Relax, Buel. I know you’ve always sought to pull my ship from under me by winning over the crew, but...” He looked around the empty room, “there is no crew now. My offer is still standing, only now it is split two ways instead of five.”

Buel shook her head vehemently. “I’m not going after that android again. It’s suicide.” As she turned away, Reed finally noticed that she was holding her right wrist in her left hand. It had already begun to swell.

Reed sniffed. What fools! Had they not heard a word he had said? Had they not heard what Lore had said? “Don’t worry about that. I don’t plan to harm a single artificial hair on his artificial head.”
Buel glanced at Conner and back, “Then…what? What are you planning to do?”

Reed pressed a few more choice controls on the panel, just enough to guarantee a little safety on his own ship should his two remaining crewmen get ideas. He shrugged carelessly as the door opened and he moved to leave. “I plan to have you both do what I say when I say for the substantial amount of money I am offering you.”

Conner closed his eyes and looked as if he would be sick. “What if I don’t want the money. What if I don’t want anything to do with this anymore?”

Reed shrugged again. Did they really have to ask? He turned and left the room, pleased to walk through the quiet, dim corridors of his ship. As he vanished around the corner, Conner leapt to Buel’s side and grabbed her shoulders.

“What the hell are we going to do? He’s lost his mind!”

“It’s a lot of money, Conner. More than either of us could ever make on our own.” She muttered the words as if she were reading lines. She didn’t even believe it anymore.

“What!” Conner stepped back and leaned against the control console. He really did look as if he was going to be sick. “We can’t travel forever, and as soon as we make port somewhere, I am gone!”

Buel was starring past him, all the blood having run from her tired face. “That might not be a good idea.”

“Why the hell not—!” He stopped at the sight of her frozen face and followed her gaze to the viewport.

Just outside the ship, Klar’s cracked, frozen face starred back at them as he drifted lifeless past the window.
Chapter 39

“I don’t need it.”

For two years he had drifted in open space, subject to solar flares, micro-meteorites, and gravitational eddies. After being rescued by the Pakleds he had spent more than a year in the company of the worst criminals known to the Alpha Quadrant, and had more than once dodged a disruptor blast to the back. Still, Lore had never encountered as many close calls with death as he had aboard the Enterprise. Or, perhaps he had just never noticed them before. Perhaps life had become a little more precious to him recently. He knew that one life in particular had become very precious to him.

The sickbay doors opened at his presence, and he was relieved to see that the room was in far better shape than the corridor. It was quieter now, for the panic had subsided and those most badly injured had been drugged into some kind of peace. He looked across the room to the bed where he had last seen Anna. She was not there. Lore stepped into the doorway to Crusher’s office.

“Where is Anna?”

Crusher looked up from her desk and frowned, “Well, I’m glad to see you had the forethought to dress yourself.”

Lore leaned against the doorframe and sighed. He had hardly noticed or remembered that when he and Anna had transported into sickbay he had been naked from the waist up. “I shouldn’t think that would make you uncomfortable, Doctor.” Lore said sarcastically, “As Data’s secondary caregiver, I can’t imagine how many times you’ve seen him naked.”

Crusher slammed her data-pad onto the desk, “Do you have a reason for being here? If not, get out.”

“You really do hate me, don’t you?”

Maybe it was the honest tone in his voice, or perhaps Crusher had simply reached her limit of exhaustion, but she looked at him with a painful expression and closed her eyes. “Anna is in the recovery room in the back. She’ll be fine.”

Lore turned away but stopped before he even cleared the doorframe. Damnit. “Thank you.” He said it as quickly as possible and scooted off. The door to the recovery room was different from most on the ship, for instead of pulling to the side in a loud hiss, the door swung on silent hinges. He pushed through slowly and looked around the dark room. There were no windows, making the dim light even more silencing. Nurse Ogawa stood over a bed in the far corner with a hypospray in hand. Lore recognized the man in the bed, for he was the same one he had seen with the devastating arm wound. Nurse Ogawa pressed the hypospray to his neck, but he hardly stirred.

“Oh!” Ogawa jumped a few inches as she turned in Lore’s direction. She immediately made an embarrassed smile, “I’m sorry, I didn’t think anyone was there.”

“Am I allowed to stay?” He asked in a low whisper, for it was the same voice Ogawa had made and he considered it appropriate.
“Um….” She seemed surprised by his request—for why would Lore ask permission to do anything?—and shrugged. “Of course. She’s right over there.”

Lore didn’t bat an eye at the nurse’s assumption, and moved toward a bio-bed a few yards away. Anna lay on her side, her face turned from the room. Her hands were cradled close to her face in the most common pose of human slumber. Perhaps she was asleep. Perhaps it was best if he come back later.

_Not this time._

He came to the side of the bed and looked down at her. Even in the dark he could tell she was remarkably improved. The sickly blue tint of her skin had gone, and the blood that had marked her hair and forehead and been meticulously cleaned away. A very quiet hiss sounded and Lore looked down to examine the bio bed. A small clear tube, red with dark blood, came from the head of the bio-bed and ended at a small hypospray pad on the back of Anna’s hand. The tiny device injected a small amount of blood, paused, then did the same again after a few seconds. No matter how advanced human medicine became, something as rudimentary as a transfusion would always exist.

“I see you.”

Lore knelt down in a flash, almost bringing his face level with hers. “Are you awake?” He whispered.

Anna opened her eyes in a groggy fashion and looked at him. “What happened?”

A stake jabbed Lore in the chest, its metaphorical tip threatening to sink. “You don’t remember anything?”

She shook her head just barely, “What happened to Reed? Where are they?”

“We disabled his weapons, but we weren’t able to follow him. He’s gone.”

Anna closed her eyes and turned her face further into the stiff pillow. She didn’t say anything, and Lore began to feel the stake pressing harder. What he had said on the planet’s surface could not be misconstrued, not even by her forgiving nature. A panic began to slowly work its way over him. Maybe she was being silent for a reason.

“Anna, I…I was sure that Reed was going to kill me. I don’t expect you to—” He gasped at the sudden warmth of her hand against his. He looked down to see her fingers lacing slowly through his, and her eyes fixed on him. A slow smile crossed her lips as she pulled his hand onto the bed next to her. What panic he had begun to fall under drifted away, to be replaced by the most inexplicable feeling. He was too cautious to let it take complete hold of him.

“Come here.” Anna whispered and pulled gently on his hand.

Lore leaned close as she turned her face up. He was so stunned, he wasn’t sure if he should do what he wanted to, but Anna answered the question for him. With her free hand, she guided his face towards her and kissed him. It was the kind of slow, gentle kiss that invites one to linger, but Anna pulled back just enough for their lips to part. Lore’s breath was caught, stunned just as much as he was, and he could think of nothing better to do than press his forehead against hers and smile. Was this what it felt like to be human? Was it like this for all of them? If so, Lore could not fathom how most of them made it through the day.

“Lore?” She whispered, so quietly that no one else would have heard.
“Mmm?”

“I love you too.”

He brought his hand around to rest on her shoulder, but it was pitifully inadequate. He wanted to scoop her up in his arms and burry his face in her hair, but he knew he could not disturb the transfusion tube going to the back of her hand. He could hear her heart rate increasing, though the beat sounded pitifully weak. He pulled back, but kept his hand where she had taken it. Anna dropped her head back against the pillow and sighed heavily.

“I think I’m going to fall asleep.” She muttered with exhaustion, “Will you stay with me?”

Lore smiled and looked behind him. Seeing a low nurse’s stool, he pulled it near to the bed and sat down. “I’ll stay.”

Anna smiled and was already close to drifting off. She continued to caress her fingers through his for some time. When she finally stopped, Lore cupped his other hand over hers.

“Did you get your ship?”

He looked up, “What?”

“From the moon. Did you get it?” Anna muttered.

“No.” He whispered back with a smile. “I don’t need it.”
Chapter 40

“You surprised me.”

“Have you ever had a dream that came true?”

Guinan smiled broadly and continued to stir the drink in front of her, “Of course I have. I’m willing to wager you have too.”

“Oh.” Anna rested her chin on her hand, “Is that an El’ Aurian thing, then?”

“Not exclusively, but I think it can apply to us more than others. Most of the time you feel something is going to happen or should happen; should have happened, but didn’t. When it’s really intense, you might even see it.”

Anna smiled in a coy fashion, “I know you won’t take this the wrong way, so I’ll say it. Humans find that kind of stuff really ridiculous.”

Guinan did laugh, which relieved Anna to some extent. She sprinkled a dark red powder into the clear goblet in front of her and continued to stir, “Aren’t Vulcans always criticizing humans for following their ‘gut’, for putting their feelings above logic?”

“Yes.” Anna admitted, “But, humans who do everything on their gut feeling are criticized by other humans. It’s not supposed to control everything they do.”

Guinan smiled again, and by now Anna recognized it as a ‘gotcha’ smile. She frowned, “What?”

“If memory serves, you were supposed to be the chief engineer on the Harrison, right? Was it a human gut instinct that told you to switch billets, or something else?”

Anna dropped her head down and stifled a laugh, “No one likes people who are right all the time, you know. They become very unpopular.”

“Oh. It’s a good thing I’m not right all the time,” Guinan smiled, “Now, what dream of yours has come true?”

Anna stiffened and became suddenly interested in the wide array of bottles on the counter, “It was just a hypothetical question.”

“Mmm…humans are such bad liars, and El-Aurians even worse. I’m afraid you can’t win either way.”

Anna glanced around her briefly. It was still more than two hours before the beginning of the day shift, and only a few exhausted officers from the mid-shift sat in Ten Forward, nursing large cups of coffee and falling asleep over their log books. She turned back to Guinan, “I had a dream about running through a thick forest. I was being chased by someone, or a group of people, and I couldn’t run any more. Just before I’m sure they’re going to get me…I wake up.” Anna looked away, hoping with all her might that Guinan could not see her omission, “I think that was Martzy
Prime. I think I was dreaming about running from Reed and his crew.”

Guinan removed the stirrer from the drink and slid the red-gold concoction toward Anna, “Running away from something is a very common theme in dreams, and there’s a lot in human literature and mythology to make forests a forbidding place.”

Anna sighed. It was the omission she was purposely making that solidified the whole thing, but she could already feel her cheeks pinking just at the thought of revealing it. But Guinan could be trusted. Her confidence was like a steel trap. “I…um…Lore was in the dream. He stops them. I don’t see his face, but at the same time I was sure it was him.”

“Once again, that’s not so difficult to imagine. It’s a stretched coincidence, I’ll admit, but Lore did save you in the shuttle bay—”

“I had this dream before I came to the Enterprise.”

The small mark of doubt melted from Guinan’s face. Her expression became soft and almost sympathetic. “That’s incredibly uncommon, even for the oldest El-Aurians. It’s a good thing, too. Life would be very dull if we saw everything coming.”

“Then you think it was real? You think I saw that before it happened?”

“It certainly seems that way.” Guinan said casually, “Now, try this before it cools too much. It has to be at just the right temperature.”

Anna looked down at the drink, which appeared to be swirling under its own power, and felt an almost giddy rush. Newfound clairvoyance can do that to people. She raised the drink and smelled first. It had the intense smell of oranges. “What is this?”

“Just drink it. You have to do it all at once, though, before it evaporates.”

“Evaporates?” Anna balked.

“Go ahead.”

Anna tilted the drink back, intent of downing the small amount, but before she knew it the glass appeared to empty. A little rush of thick air, like breathing fog in the early morning, went down her throat. Anna sputtered a bit and released a loud belch.

Guinan laughed delightfully, “Perfect. Those are so hard to make.”

“Ah, Guinan!” Anna groaned, wiping at her lips with a napkin and looked particularly embarrassed. “What was that?”

“Tarkalian sunrise. It’s set to evaporate at body temperature, so you’re really drinking the vapor rather than the liquid. What do you think?”

“I think it’s certainly not for formal dinner parties.” Anna said before releasing another small belch into the napkin. “It’s like swallowing air.”

Guinan shrugged, “That is an unfortunate side-effect, but the taste is worth it.”

“Maybe.” Anna set the class down and took another look around the room. “Will you tell me something, Guinan, and be honest?”

“Of course.”
“How is everyone? I mean, about the battle with Reed’s ship?”

Guinan placed Anna’s glass under the bar and leaned forward, “They don’t blame you, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It is not what I’m asking, and you know it.”

“Mmm.” Guinan rested her elbows on the bar. She tapped the side of her temple thoughtfully, “There are some who blame Lore. There are some who say he wasn’t worth it, but not so many as you would think.”

“How many?” Anna pressed.

“Four, maybe five that I have heard directly, but it’s a big ship. Still, sentiment feeds on sentiment, and if it were greater than that you would notice.”

Anna closed her eyes in a deep show of relief, but it was even more intense than she let on. “It isn’t his fault, you know. He has a right to protect himself.”

“And some would argue that Narok Reed has a right to avenge his wife.”

“Guinan!” Anna leaned back as if she had been struck. She could not believe her friend would say such a thing.

“I didn’t say Narok Reed has a right to revenge. I said that some will say he does.” Guinan noted calmly, “And so long as there are enough people saying that, he will get his opportunities.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that I have known people like Narok Reed. Everything else in life is gone for them. All they have is this goal. Narok Reed will either kill Lore or die trying, or both. I guarantee it.”

The air seemed to grow colder all of a sudden, and Anna shivered. She pulled her hands from the bar and rested them in her lap. Unconsciously, she rubbed her left hand with her right and imagined whose hand had been there only a few hours ago.

“Where is Lore?” Guinan asked. She leaned against the bar with a casual smile, as if the question were not at all odd.

“He’s with Lt. Worf.” Anna cringed at the very thought, “Captain Picard wants him to devise a defense against the phaser modifications Reed had.”

“Ah.” Guinan nodded. “Will you see him later?”

Anna looked up, giving Guinan a most curious expression. It didn’t last long though, for Guinan was displaying that subtle, knowing smile that the crew knew so well. There was no point in pretending, “Yes. I don’t think he knows I left sickbay, though. He…he stayed with me in sickbay for a long time, until Data called him.”

“That’s understandable.” Guinan said, “He’s in love with you.”

A sudden nervous laugh escaped Anna’s lips, “That’s, eh…did he tell you that?”

“He wouldn’t have to. I’m surprised he had to tell you.”
Anna couldn’t help but smile, though it was mostly to hide her embarrassment. It was also to hide her worry, “Can I read approval in your tone, or is that hoping too much?”

Guinan pursed her lips, “Would that surprise you? If I approved?”

“Yes, actually.” Anna admitted, “I’ll be surprised if anyone does.”

“Mmm.” Guinan began corking the various bottles on the counter and placing them back on the shelves below. “Do you care about that?”

“I care enough to want it, but not enough for it to change anything. Guinan, I….” Anna sighed heavily and leaned forward, “I love him. I know everyone is going to think I’m out of my mind, but I hope you at least can understand it.”

Guinan took one of the bottles in hand, but rather than setting it on the shelf she traced her fingers idly over the etched crystal. “Have I ever told you about my fifth husband? Wonderful man. He would carry me up the stairs in our house just because he could, and I don’t think a day went by that he didn’t call me beautiful. But outside, he was the most stoic, unapproachable man my family had ever met. They couldn’t stand him.”

“Are you trying to tell me that Lore is unapproachable?” Anna said.

“Absolutely, but more importantly I’m trying to tell you that I married him despite what my family thought.” Guinan placed the bottle below and folded her hands in front of her, “My own experience tells me that Lore must be different with you, and that’s enough. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“You don’t think it’s selfish of me?”

“Of course it’s selfish.” Guinan said with a smile, “Love is selfish.”

“Thanks, Guinan.” Anna said with true sincerity. She pushed back from the bar and hopped down from the stool. “I think I’ll go see if engineering needs any help.”

“Did Dr. Crusher release you for duty?” Guinan asked suspiciously.

Anna shifted her eyes and smiled, “Maybe….”

Guinan laughed pleasantly looked out at the dark starscape, “I may not understand why you like Lore, but I certainly understand why he likes you.”

*I  *  *

“I have told you! The phase emitters cannot withstand that kind of power!” Worf boomed, slamming his fist on the top of the console.

Lore rolled his eyes and tossed one of the dismantled phase emitters overhead, catching it nimbly as it came back down, “They would if you would install the Borg modifications I suggested.”

“No Borg technology!” Worf pushed himself away from the console and crossed his arms. His patience was wearing thin, and Lore’s unperturbed manner was not making it any better.
“As I have told you before, Lore,” Data interjected, “Federation law prohibits the use of technology derived from Borg systems.”

“But you’re willing to use ideas based on Borg systems. Otherwise, why would we be making these modifications in the first place?”

“Are you going to help us or not!” Worf demanded.

Lore caught the phase emitter again, and just as casually continued to toss it. “It’s an ignorant policy.”

Data crossed the room just as Lore turned, and snatched the phase emitter out of the air. “More focus on your part would be appreciated.”

Lore raised his brow, impressed, “Fine, but my renewed focus won’t change the fact that you need to install multi-phasic relays to increase the power tolerance of your phaser banks.”

“We do not have to use Borg technology to achieve that.” Data replied.

“No, you don’t.” Lore replied readily, “But it would be much faster.”

“We are not in a hurry.”

“Well,” Lore said as he took the emitter back, “I am.

Data stopped himself before asking why Lore would be in a hurry, for the near light-hearted demeanor he had shown since arriving in weapons control gave him some suspicion as to the answer. After all, Lore had been in sickbay when he called him. Lt. Hall was in sickbay. “Since we have no intention of using Borg technology, your particular expertise will not be required.”

Lore tossed the emitter in Worf’s direction, causing the already irritated man to growl as he caught it, and moved toward the exit, “Good. I have far more pleasant places to be.”

“But I would appreciate your assistance.” Data said.

Lore stopped, “What?”

“The engineering staff is fully occupied with repairs to essential systems.” Data replied, “The modifications will be complete much faster if you assist me.”

Lore ignored the oddity of Data asking him for help, for he knew Data would do anything for his ship. Instead, he glanced at the door and honestly considering refusing him. After all, merely the thought of being with Anna again was enough to make his breath uneven. Still, the high was making him more congenial than usual. He walked back to the phaser bank assembly and sighed, “Fine. I’ll start with the alpha series.”

“Thank you.” Data turned to Worf, “If you would like to return to the bridge, I will attend to the modifications.”

Worf nodded thankfully and gave Lore a final sneering look before he departed. Lore set about pulling the alpha series emitters apart. Under usual circumstances, he would have worked quickly just in order to be away from Data, but this time he had a far more pleasant motivation. “If we change all the series relays and reroute the distribution nodes, the computer should be able to perform the systems tests without supervision.” Lore said quickly.
Data glanced at him as he pulled another panel away from the console, “I believe that will be sufficient.”

“Good.”

“Then you can return to Lt. Hall’s company.”

Lore let the emitter panel drop with a bang, and gave Data a dangerous glare, “What is that supposed to mean?”

“That is why you are ‘in a hurry’, is it not?” Data replied matter-of-factly. “You wish to rejoin Lt. Hall in sickbay?”

Lore stood up straight and tried to see some ulterior motive past Data’s innocent stare. “And what makes you think I want to go to sickbay?”

Data sighed and turned back to the emitters, “I was under the impression that you had come to terms with your feelings for Lt. Hall. If you have not, I regret mentioning it—"

“What do you know about my feelings!” Lore cried, utterly outraged. “Mind your own damn business!”

Now it was Data’s turn to show some irritation. He closed the emitter box and turned to Lore, “Forgive me for being blunt, Lore, but how long do you plan to conceal what has been public knowledge for some time?”

Lore glared at him.

“I see.” Data sighed, “The fact that you spend most of your free time with Lt. Hall would, perhaps, not be proof enough, but I am afraid that your physical assault of Lt. Larson convinced many. Do you love Lt. Hall, or not?”

Lore narrowed his eyes at his brother and truly began to regret his decision to stay. “That is none of your business.”

“Since you would be more likely to be forthcoming with a negative response, I will take that as a yes.”

“Agh! Damnit!” Lore cried, clenching his teeth like a vice, “Did you deactivate your emotion chip? Is that why you’re being so damn irritating?”

Data made a small smile, “I am perfectly capable of being ‘damn irritating’ with my emotion chip active.”

“So what, Data? Do you disapprove? Do you plan to use to your rank to order Anna away from me?” Lore said. Aside from anger, which he had always been accustomed to feeling, a more heart-wrenching sensation affected him. He was genuinely worried.

Data looked instantly taken aback, almost hurt, “I would never use my rank or position to affect the personal life of a crewman. As to your other question, I do not disapprove.”

“Please!” Lore balked, “You don’t expect me to believe that.”

“No, I do not. I have given you little reason to believe that my opinion of you is changeable.” Data replied. He turned back to the emitters, “We are wasting time. We have much work to do.”
Lore remained still while Data resumed his dismantling of the emitter case. What exactly was Data trying to say to him, and did he want to hear it anyway? Lore, reluctantly, reached for the second emitter case and began pulling the components apart. Even if he did not want to be there, it was in everyone’s best interest. Reed could return, as unlikely as that was, and they would be found defenseless until the alterations were made. He set to work silently, but something grated on his mind, and now that it was there he could not bring himself to avoid the opportunity. He looked up sharply.

“If I had been human, would you have transported me into open space?”

Data’s hands stopped moving, but he did not look up.

“If I had been human,” Lore continued, “would you have put me into a coma and handed me over to doctors for experimentation?”

“I did not give you to Dr. Maddox—.”

“Answer me.”

“No.” Data looked up, “No, I would not have done those things. If you were human, I might have transporter you into space, but I would not have left you there. If you had been human, I would have incapacitated you and handed you over to Federation authorities for proper judgment.”

Lore stared at him, wide-eyed and outraged. It was not so much the answer that angered him, but the fact that he had finally admitted it. But he had not admitted everything yet. He wanted to hear it all. “Why?”

“Because I hated you!” Data shot back suddenly.

“No! You weren’t capable of hating anything, then.” Lore countered, “It was colder than that, Data, more logical than that. Why don’t you tell me the real reason you did it? You think a human life is worth more than ours. You thought an android just didn’t qualify for the same considerations as a human, and you probably still do! Oh!” Lore sneered at him in utter contempt. Here it was, finally! “You would have fit in nicely with the colonists, Data. It’s a pity you never met any of them!”

In a sudden flash of white, Data’s hands sprang out, striking Lore dead center in the chest. He flew back off his feet and struck the wall panel that had been propped against the bulked. The panel snapped in half under him as he fell to the floor. Rushing anger coursing through him, but before he could move to regain his feet he was struck by the dumbfounded look on Data’s face. His brother looked down at him, eyes wide and confused, and they both remained still for several seconds.

“Why did you fall?” Data asked. It was a good question, for even with Data’s complete brute force, Lore should have been able to counter and keep his footing.

Lore shifted his eyes a few times. He could hardly believe what had just happened. Data—of all people—had lost his temper! He almost laughed, “I didn’t think you would do anything. You surprised me.”

A few more seconds of shocked silence and Data, in a most inexplicable shift, began to laugh. It started quite small, only a smile, but he eventually turned his face away as full amusement overtook him.

“What is so damn funny?” Lore said, though he was on the verge of laughing too.
“I surprised you.” Data managed to reply as he collected himself, “That is what I told Commander Riker after he discovered me unconscious in Dr. Soong’s lab. ‘Lore surprised me’.”

“You think that’s funny?” Lore regained his feet quickly and looked behind him. He had been managing not to laugh very well, but now it was just too much.

“Now you believe it is funny?” Data said.

“Not that.” Lore managed over his laughter. He stepped aside and continued to look down, “You broke three of the emitters.”

Data now noticed the crushed, crystalline devices under the wall panel and frowned, “Oh… shit.”

“Ha!” Lore covered his face with his hands and nearly bent over in a fit of laughs. He could hardly understand what was wrong with him. He should not be laughing. He should not be in the mood to find anything funny. Data had admitted his crime, had assaulted him even. He should be enraged! Still….

“I don’t care anymore, Data.” Lore finally said over the last small laugh. He looked back at his brother, and his expression was a portrait of voluntary defeat. “I don’t care what you did, I don’t care why you did it.” He could not—would not—bring himself to admit the rest of the truth, that some part of him was happy it had all happened.

Data stepped back to the emitter case as if to continue working, but he did not touch anything, “You are right, Lore. I did not believe the life of an android was worth the life of a human. I saw no ethical question then in the manner of your capture.”

“I suppose none of your friends raised a question either?” Lore replied.

Data shook his head, “No.”

Once again, Lore tried to become angry, but it just wouldn’t happen. All he could manage was a mild bitterness.

“There is another reason.” Data continued, “You were correct to remind me that I could not feel anger or hatred at that time, but I was capable of a sense of self-preservation.”

Lore starred at him quizzically.

“If a member of another species encounters a bad human,” Data continued, “They may not conclude that all humans are bad, for there are billions of them. There are, however, only two Soong type androids. You…embarrassed me.”

Lore turned his eyes up to the ceiling and didn’t know whether to sneer or laugh. Either would have been appropriate. “So, Data is vain after all.”

“As vanity is a common human trait, I will take that as a compliment.” Data countered.

“Good. It wasn’t an insult.” Lore picked up one of the smashed emitters and tossed it onto the console, “Now that we have more work to do, I suggest we get it over with.”

Data nodded and recovered the rest of the emitters from the floor, “You did not answer my question, Lore.”
“What question was that?” Lore said, still facing the console.

“Do you love Lt. Hall?”

Lore sighed and turned the broken emitter over in his hands. *What the hell*... “Yes.”

“I thought so.”
It was the time of the Bajoran Gratitude Festival, and the entire station smelled of burning Bateret leaves. The smell was somewhat pleasant, like Earth pine, but the soot was worse, and every year a majority of the station maintenance staff would be scrubbing the black marks from ceilings and floors. Try as he might, the station manager had never been able to put an end to the practice. Bajoran residents, of whom there were many, could not be deterred from the ceremonial burning of renewal scrolls. After writing their troubles on the small pieces of handmade paper, the adherents would burn them over piles of Bateret leaves, thereby symbolically burning away their troubles.

The station manager turned back and smiled at a group of Bajoran women as they dropped a handful of tightly rolled papers into the fire. The smoke fumed and stuck to the rafters.

“Sir? Do you have them?”

The station manager pulled himself from his reverie and looked down at his personal assistant, a short, pixie like Bajoran with bright blond hair. “Are you sure this is really necessary, Lana? I’m not Bajoran—”

“The festival doesn’t just recognize Bajorans, Sir. It’s for everyone.” She assured him. “Besides, I think the Vedek would appreciate the gesture.”

The station manager sighed and reached into his coat pocket. He pulled out a small roll of paper, tied closed with a red string. “Here you are.”

“David!” Lana cried in a whisper. She looked scandalously over her shoulder, “The string can only be red if your trouble is an immoral secret.”

David Shaw looked down at the scroll and grumbled. No one told him that, and since when was it his responsibility to become an expert on Bajoran religious traditions! “What if it is an immoral secret?” He said with a chuckle.

Lana did not appear amused, “Only a Vedek can burn a red renewal scroll, after reading it, and the entire station would sink into gossip if it gets out that the station manager had a red scroll.” She shook her head as if it was the most outrageous thing she had ever heard. “I’ll tell you again. Green is for career trouble, purple is for family troubles, gold is for money troubles, and blue is for relationship troubles...”

Mr. Shaw sighed. The entire thing was an invasion of privacy, but he had at least been assured that the scrolls would not be read. “Fine. Do you have a green string?”

“I’ll change it before I give it to the Vedek.” Lana assured him as she tucked the scroll into her ever-present messenger bag. “Are you still waiting?”

“What?” He looked back, “Oh, yes, of course I’m still waiting! Been waiting all morning. They’re docking now.”
Lana smiled at his excitement, for it was not often that the staid and calm manager of Starbase Seventy-Four got this excited about anything. “David, Starships dock here all the time. I don’t see the reason in getting excited over this one.”

“You can’t be serious!” He proclaimed, rocking back on his heels. “Everyone should see the Enterprise at least once. That ship is legendary.”

“Mmm, well all the preparations you asked for are ready. I told engineering to reserve six crews for the Enterprise repairs and I…um…asked security to increase their entrance protocols.”

“Ah, yes.” Shaw grumbled. He remembered reading the priority communiqué from the Enterprise outlining the extensive emergency repairs the ship needed. An addendum to the message had included a warning that the Enterprise might have been followed by one Narok Reed. The message had been quite detailed. “I would hope that Captain Picard will see fit to keep his less…popular passengers off the station. I don’t need a panic.”

Lana laughed a bit, but tried to cover it as soon as Shaw frowned. “Sorry, Sir, but I don’t think most of the Bajoran residents have ever even heard the name Lore.”

“No, but I’m sure every human on board will update them the moment someone spots him. I just don’t need any trouble. In fact,” He looked up and bit at his lower lip. “Do me a favor and put a security block on all database information pertaining to Lore, especially his criminal files.”

Lana shrugged, “I’ll get right on it.”

“Great, and don’t forget to tell maintenance to—”

A harsh bang from the airlock doors drew his attention, and David Shaw immediately corrected his posture and straightened the front of his jacket. “Where is the Vedek? She’s supposed to be here to meet him.”

Lana looked over her shoulder, “I think she got held up, Sir. It’s just us.”

“Good enough. Now, be professional, stand up straight, and when you shake his hand, make it firm.”

She smiled, unable to help it, “And you call Bajoran protocol intense….”

“Shh! They’re coming!” He faced the airlock just as the doors parted and the mild hiss of air equalized the chambers. In a matter of seconds, David Shaw was faced with three of the most famous men in the Alpha quadrant. Well, two men and one android.

“Mr. Shaw.” Picard nodded somberly. He extended a hand and shook it warmly, “This is my first officer, William Riker, and my second in command, Commander Data.”

Riker extended a jovial hand and leaned down slightly, as he was often forced to do because of his height. Shaw shook his hand happily and tried to keep his excitement under wraps. Data, who was nothing if not thorough in mimicking human custom, also extended his hand. Shaw met it with a second of trepidation, as if he were afraid of his hand being crushed.

“I’m glad you were able to make accommodations for us so quickly, Mr. Shaw. Most of the stations this far from prime Federation territory aren’t equipped to deal with a ship our size.” Picard said.

“Oh, no trouble at all, Captain. It’s been a slow week.” Shaw assured him. Of course it was a
horrible lie. He had prematurely evicted three other vessels to make room for the Enterprise, and had even had to pay off one of the Bolian Captains to not make a fuss. Still, it was worth it for the Federation flag ship! “We’ve set aside six engineering teams to help your crew with your repairs. Is the damage very extensive?”

Picard glanced at Data.

“Several exterior shield emitters were damaged over the port warp nacelle, as well as the locking mechanisms for the warp-core hatch.” Data said, “We require dry dock in order to make external repairs.”

“Of course, of course.” Shaw nodded, “Our repair suits will be at your disposal if you need them. We just got the new HS series. They’re much more nimble.”

Riker smiled at the man’s obvious exuberance. After so many years aboard the Enterprise, he had all gotten used to it.

“Thank you, Mr. Shaw.” Data said, “But I do not require protective suiting to work in a vacuum. I will be conducting most of the external repairs.”

“Oh, well…of course you don’t.” Shaw chuckled awkwardly.

“You mean you don’t have to breathe at all!!” Lana proclaimed. Her face lit up like that of a curious child hovering over an aquarium. “Won’t you, I don’t know, freeze up out there?”

Picard and Riker looked mildly amused, but Mr. Shaw’s face was turning red.

“No.” Data assured her, “I am capable of maintaining a core temperature requisite to my functioning needs even in a vacuum.”

“Oh.” Lana gripped the strap of her messenger bag and looked embarrassed.

“Of course our station is at your crew’s disposal, Captain.” Shaw said quickly, “We’re in the middle of the Bajoran Gratitude Festival, so I hope you don’t mind the smell.”

Picard took a deep breath, “Not at all, Sir. I find the smell of Bateret leaves refreshing.”

Riker paused, “It smells like pine.”

“There is one other thing I was hoping you could help us with, Mr. Shaw.” Picard continued, “During our engagement we sustained some heavy damage to our phaser systems and too many of our phase emitters were destroyed. As you know, phase emitters contain organic components so we cannot replicate—”

“Oh! No need to ask, Captain. This is, after all, a Federation station. You’re welcome to any equipment you might need.” Shaw turned to Lana, “Call supply and tell them to set aside some phase emitters.”

“Thank you, Mr. Shaw.” Data said, “Lore should arrive momentarily to retrieve them.”

Shaw’s throat seemed to close all of a sudden, and he sputtered a bit, “I’m sorry, eh….Lore is going to get, um….He’s coming onboard the station?”

Data gave a quick glance to Captain Picard before going back to Shaw, “Yes. He will be assisting me with some of the exterior repairs. If you object to Lore’s presence on the station,
“We need five replacement emitters, but I’ll get six.” Came a quick voice, along with pounding footsteps over the grating. Lore wedged his way through Picard and Riker to step into the corridor. He had a data-pad in hand and tossed it to Data, who caught it nimbly.

Shaw took a step back and looked mildly ill. Lana twisted her bag strap around her hand and starred.

“What happened?” Riker looked between the two, aghast.

“It is not relevant at the moment, Sir.” Data said quickly. He gave Lore an irritated look, “Six emitters will be fine, but I believe I will have a crewmen retrieve—”

“I’m faster and I’m already here.” Lore interjected. He looked up and appeared to notice Shaw and Lana for the first time, for his attention really was elsewhere. He and Data had only just completed the modification setup to the phasers, and installing the new emitters was the only step left. After that, he would be free to go find Anna. He gave Shaw a curious look, then nearly laughed, “David Shaw. I didn’t think this station would keep the same manager for so long.”

Shaw’s complexion was growing increasingly green, “I, um…I’m sorry?”

“You were the station manager ten years ago. I remember you.” Lore said with a smile. His newfound good humor was putting him in the mood to mess with people, and David Shaw looked like a man easily messed with.

“You have been to Starbase Seventy-Four before?” Data asked.

Lore nodded and turned back to Shaw. “A little more than ten years ago there was a breakin of the lower level storage bay? Two warp coils and four inertial regulators were stolen. You never found out who did it.”

“Oh, Prophets!” Lana exclaimed. She shifted her eyes quickly between Mr. Shaw, Data, and Lore. “Did you take those things?”

Lore shrugged. “I had no latinum.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Riker said to the ceiling, as if begging for strength. “Is there a place in this sector where you haven’t committed a crime?”

Lore smirked, “Plenty of places, Riker. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” Lore chose, quite deliberately, to ignore the outraged expression of Mr. Shaw and the broadly restrained irritation from Picard, and continued quickly down the corridor.

The front portion of the docking ring, where the Enterprise had docked, almost directly faced the entrance to the main promenade, and so he was surrounded by people in very short order. As an open station, Starbase Seventy-Four had a wide variety of occupants, many of whom had little to nothing to do with Starfleet. A fair portion of the merchants were Bajoran, and he recognized the fresh scent of burning Bateret leaves. He had never bothered to learn what their purpose was, for he had never had much interest in the superstitions of organic beings. Up ahead, past a thick throng
of people, Lore saw the turn off from the promenade that led to the various engineering departments, including equipment supply. Unless the layout of the station had been changed, he knew precisely where he was going.

An intense organic smell filled the air, and since it was not something usually associated with space stations, Lore took a moment to look around. The promenade was much more diverse than her remembered it, for since the station had gone from a military outpost to an open port, a large number of aliens had taken up residence there. He followed his nose to the most potent source of the burning scent, and saw a dim alcove to his left. Situated between a bustling bar and dreary Ferengi bank, he saw a beautiful, low ceiling room that appeared to serve no purpose. He saw no clerks or merchandise, nor any visible access points to the station’s inner workings. The walls were hung with simplistic tapestries, and a dim orange light radiated from hidden wall sconces. In a rare moment of curiosity, Lore side-stepped out of the crowd and moved closer to the unoccupied room. At the center of the back wall, a large steel bowl stood on a raised pedestal. A thick stream of grey smoke rose from it.

Lore had made a conscious decision a long time ago not to fill his memory banks with unnecessary information. It was not that he lacked the memory capacity, it was simply that having the answer to everything so readily made life remarkably dull. So, as he looked around the dim room and noted with mild delight the beauty of the simple decoration, he had no idea what any of it was.

“Hello.”

Lore pulled his hand back, for he had been about to run his fingers along the velvet edge of one of the tapestries. To his left, an older woman in traditional Bajoran garb stood with her hands clasped in front of her. Her robes were almost the same color as the dim orange light, making her blend in like a piece of the décor. She took another step forward, revealing the small curtained door from which she had come.

“That is a very fine one.” She said softly, raising her chin in the direction of the tapestry Lore had almost touched, “From the ancient city of B’Tula. It was hand-stitched by candlelight more than six-hundred years ago.”

Lore stepped away from the wall and looked longingly at the busy promenade. This was why humans accused curiosity of murdering cats. “I must go.”

“But why in such a hurry, Child?” She woman continued, “You were drawn by the smoke of the Bateret leaves. Perhaps you are in need of renewal?”

Lore looked back at the smoking bowl and tapestries before turning back to the woman. Her expression was polite and unconcerned, as if she had not the faintest idea to whom she spoke. Seeing that she, indeed, saw nothing recognizable in his face, Lore felt a weight fall from his shoulders, but it was a weight he had hardly known was there. He could, on a single hand, count the number of times in his life that he had not been either instantly recognized or mistaken for Data. The anonymity was refreshing.

“I was only curious.” He admitted, “I don’t know what this is.”

“Mmm, this station sees many strangers. Come, and I will explain it to you.”

Lore shook his head and moved closer to the promenade, “I don’t have time.”

“Child, we have nothing but time.” As if a statue coming to life, the woman moved swiftly
across the floor and slipped her arm around his. “I can see that you would benefit from it. Come.”

Lore sighed a bit, but did not put up much of a fight. His anonymity left him in the spirit to indulge his curiosity. The woman guided him to the large bowl and waved her hand through the stream of smoke.

“Are you familiar with renewal scrolls?” She asked.

“No.” Lore replied as he looked into the smoldering bowl of leaves. There were other bits of charred material in the bowl, crispy hulks that looks like half incinerated tubes, and shriveled pieces of string. “You burn the scrolls?”

“Yes.” She nodded, “During the Gratitude Festival, we seek to thank the prophets for their guidance and their help, but it’s also a time of personal renewal. The scrolls are designed to burn away our troubles.”

Lore lifted his brow skeptically.

“I see you are doubtful.” She said with a smile, “In that case, there is no harm in trying.” She reached under the pedestal and removed a single slip of paper. She took a wood-handled pen from another box and presented both to Lore.

“That is unnecessary.” He said, “I don’t have any…troubles.”

“Then you must be a Prophet, because they’re the only ones who are so perfect.” She chuckled and extended the two items again. “It’s quite easy.”

Lore smiled at her insistence and took the two items. He held them for a second as if they were alien things, “Now what?”

“Now, you merely write on the paper the object of your troubles. There is no need to be overly detailed. The prophets will know exactly what you mean.”

Lore held the paper flat against his palm, but merely hovered with the pen. He could have just written any nonsense, something that a typical human might worry over, but as often happened, his good moods left him feeling honest. It was damn inconvenient. “I don’t know what to write.”

“Think of it this way. What thing could you have that would make your life perfect?”

Lore looked at the paper and smiled. He already had the perfect thing, and she was crawling around in engineering somewhere, probably with a hyperspanner in her hand.

“Or,” The woman continued, “What thing could you be rid of that would make your life perfect?”

Lore’s smile faded and he almost crumpled the rough paper in his hands. Over the last day, fleeting moments of anger had made him consider how much trouble it would be to steal a shuttle craft and go after the man who had nearly killed Anna…twice. He looked down at the paper again and held the pen towards a small jar of ink on the pedestal. It suddenly occurred to him that he had never written anything by hand before. He dipped the pen in the ink and, mimicking an antiquated script he had seen in one of Anna’s books, wrote:

*Narok Reed*
Lore dropped the pen back in the box and handed the paper over, “Here.”

She took the paper by the corner, careful to keep the written side down, “May I?”

Lore shrugged.

She turned it over and smiled, “Ah. I’m afraid I don’t read alien writing, but the hand is quite lovely.”

Lore smiled a bit, “I can write it in Bajoran, if that’s what you need.”

“No matter. The Prophets understand all languages.” She proceeded to roll the paper into a loose tube and reached under the pedestal to another set of boxes. She looked up, “What is the manner of the trouble?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is it money, or family, or career…?”

“An enemy.” Lore said. He eyed the small scroll as if he were looking at Reed himself. “He is my only trouble.”

“I see.” The woman nodded, her old face wrinkled into an honest show of sympathy. “That is understandable. For that, it is the brown thread.” She procured a short brown ribbon from one of the boxes and began wrapped it around the scroll. When there was just enough slack left for a knot, her thin fingers made one easily. She held up the scroll, “Place it in the fire.”

Lore took the scroll and held it awkwardly. He had played this far into the ridiculous ceremony, but something wouldn’t let his skepticism lie. Perhaps it was the fact that part of him was actually looking forward to burning this rough piece of paper with Narok Reed’s name on it. It was too ridiculous. He looked up and sighed, “You can’t honestly believe that burning a piece of paper will get rid of someone. If it were that easy, the Ferengi wouldn’t sell weapons.”

The old woman raised her brow as if surprised, but it quickly turned to amusement, “Why must you assume that the relief to your troubles will be found in a death? Perhaps this enemy of yours will forgive you, or you him. There is no telling how the prophets will help you.”

A strong sense of pity and envy made him turn away, for clearly this woman knew nothing about real hatred. She had never had experience with the unavoidable drive of revenge. “I doubt that.”

She shrugged, “One may hope. Now, toss it in and imagine this trouble removed from your life.”

Despite not buying into Bajoran mysticism, Lore did imagine just that. He imagined the Enterprise performing her routine, boring diplomatic duties, not being pummeled to death by a man searching only for him. He imagined Anna asleep on her antique white quilt after a long day in engineering, not battered and broken on a sickbay bio-bed. All of this and more came in the time it took him to lift his hand and drop the scroll into the embers. It caught fire slowly and the orange heat crawled over it at a tortuous, lingering pace, shriveling it into a charred hulk before it collapses. Lore smiled to himself.

“I think you will find your troubles ending soon.” The old woman said, “At least until the next
comes along.”

Lore shook his head as he turned and prepared to leave, “No. This is my only trouble.”

“Huh.” The old woman considered, “I would think that someone such as you would have many troubles.”

Lore paused, “Someone such as me?”

She smiled kindly and laid her hand on his arm, “Of course, Mr. Lore. But, if this truly is your only trouble, I would say the Prophets have already smiled on you.”

Lore’s jaw dropped a bit. He should have known better.

“Don’t worry, Child.” The woman continued, slipped her arm around his as she had a few minutes ago. “I’m sure most of the station will mistake you for your brother and that might be best, considering.” She guided him towards the edge of the promenade and continued to pat his arm reassuringly. If she noticed the mix of confusion and suspicion on Lore’s face, she gave no indication.

Lore turned around as soon as they reached the edge of the bustling crowd, “You knew who I was the moment—”

“I’m sure you must go on now. Didn’t you say you had no time?”

Lore stared at her hand, “You knew who I was.”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“And you didn’t care?”

She shook her head slowly. “You should hurry along now. I hear the Enterprise is much in need of repairs.”

“Right.” Lore could not help a smile, despite his need to be suspicious. The anonymity had been comforting, but this had turned out to be more so. “Thank you.”

“Good day.”

Lore turned hard into the crowd and almost jogged to the corridor up ahead, out of sight. The Bajoran Vedek turned back and almost collided with a young man who had suddenly emerged from behind a pillar. He had a shaggy main of blonde hair that managed to show from under the rough hood he wore.

“Sorry.” He stammered as he moved to the side.

“No trouble.”

He stepped to the side and craned his neck over the crowd. Seeing that Lore was no longer in sight, Andrew Connor pulled his hood low and fled into the crowd.
Chapter 42

“I don’t have your optimism.”

It was amazing what could be accomplished in twenty-one hours. The corridors were clear of debris and every broken light fixture had been repaired. The daily activities of a ship that was not only a workplace but a home continued with stubborn determination. Crewmen met each other for lunch, scheduled holodeck “outings”, and argued with their messy roommates. Those areas of the ship still without power were quietly sealed into the dark, like the embarrassment of a messy room to be cleaned later. Engineering was in a more chaotic state, for it was there that the real work was being done. Lore descended the ladder well and stepped silently into the junction room. He could have easily made his way through the corridors, but he was on a secret mission, and being seen simply wouldn’t do. The junction room door was already open and Lore looked out into the main bay. Just around the hulk of the warp core, Anna stood next to a young blonde woman whom Lore had seen many times, their heads close in conversation.

“Okay. I just hope you know what you’re doing.” Lt. Marsh said with a awkward shrug.

“I do. Don’t worry.” Anna looked up at the expanse of the core, more to stretch her neck than to see anything. When she brought her head down, her eyes fell directly on the junction room door, and she smiled. “I think I left that hyperspanner in tech control one.”

Marsh cringed, “I already signed those tool logs, Anna.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get it back now.” She hopped down from the platform and crossed the bay in a few long strides. As soon as she reached the junction room, she closed the door behind her. “Lore?”

He stood perfectly still on the other side of the massive plasma manifold assembly, his mouth a line concealing his smile.

Anna stepped further into the little room and looked up the ladder well, “Lore? Where did you—oh!”

Lore reached around from his hiding place and wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting her a few inches off her feet. “Hello.”

“Oh! Very funny!” She spun around in his arms just as he released her. She looked disappointed. “Did you finish the work with Data?”

“No. I told him I had something else to do.” He said quickly. Lore took her hand and let his fingers lace through hers. He could have finished his work with Data, for it would only have seen five or six hours more, but he had been unwilling to wait any longer.

“How was it on the station?” She asked. Anna stepped a bit closer to him and pressed their locked hands against his chest.

“I met the Bajoran Prylar.” He said mysteriously, “She taught me about the ‘Gratitude Festival’.”
“Really?” Anna almost cringed, “Did she…I mean, did you have to pretend to be Commander Data?”

He leaned close to her, so close that the tip of his nose touched hers, and smiled, “No. She recognized me. She didn’t care.” It was such an insignificant thing, for he had told himself so many times that he did not care about the opinions of others. Still, this small thing had lightened his mood, and something made him want to give it to Anna as if it were a present, as if he were trying to show her that not everyone thought so ill of him. Of course, he didn’t know why he would want such a thing. Anna, clearly, cared just as much about their opinions as he did.

Anna smiled, “Good. I’m glad. What else did you have to do? Or, is that just something you said to Commander Data?”

“Ah, that….” Still holding her hand, he turned and proceeded to lead her down the long, very narrow corridor that led off of the junction room. Tiny rooms, only large enough to hold a plasma manifold and console, jutted off every few yards. They passed into the realm of backup manifolds and conduits, where the lights were on standby and crewmen only came when there was something wrong.

Anna laughed in the dark and gripped his hand, “Where are we going?”

“Here.” He stopped at one of the manifold rooms and pulled her inside. The emergency lighting from the corridor was barely enough to illuminate the tiny space, but Lore’s bright skin, as always, seemed to grab whatever light was there.

“And what is ‘here’?” She said.

Lore could hear her heartbeat like a drum in her chest, and her short breath was interrupted every now and then by an involuntary laugh. It thrilled him to know that she was as excited as him, even if his pulse remained stubbornly even. He moved just enough to let more of the light from the corridor touch her face. Her eyes sparkled.

“Do you remember kissing me in sickbay?” He said softly.

“I might.” She shrugged playfully.

Lore leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her. He buried his face in her hair and whispered, “I think I can do better.”

Anna shuddered like a tree full of leaves. For a moment he thought she would fall against him, but she tilted her face up and looked at him intently. The ship was quieter than usual, the warp engines cold and silent, and it only made the thump of her heart and the rustle of her breath louder. He kissed her, catching that breath and holding it paralyzed as he pulled her against him. Dozens of thoughts that had been racing through his mind collapsed into oblivion. There was only the hot flush of her neck, and the gentle curve of her waist under his hand. Anna tightened her arms over his shoulders and moved her lips slowly against his, more than happy to let him lead her. When she broke free, desperately drawing a breath, he did not stop. He pressed his lips against her neck and forced her collar aside. Was it possible the smooth skin of her neck was even softer than her lips? Lore was determined to make sure.

He ran his fingers through her hair, brushing it aside, and felt the most intense urge to be closer to her, even closer than he already was. He drew his lips up the side of her neck and, finding the tiny curve of her earlobe, took it eagerly between his teeth.
“Huhh!” Anna gasped and dug her fingers into his shoulders. Lore pulled back at once.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered. “You don’t like that.”

“No…no.” Her breathe was heavy. She ran her fingers over his cheeks and smiled, “I like it a lot, but….”

“But?”

“But….” She smiled, “I didn’t know you had been with other women before. I think I’ll be jealous.”

His eyes widened, “I have never ‘been with’ anyone.”

Anna brought her fingers to her kiss swollen lips, “You could have fooled me. That kind of skill comes from experience.”

He rolled his eyes happily, “I was program-. Some things don’t require experience to know.” He leaned in and kissed her against, this time separating each kiss with a warm smile, placing his lips first on her lips then slowly working his way across her cheek. He didn't want to tell her that Dr. Soong had programmed him with the most intimate knowledge of romantic relationships, just as he had programmed him with the instant ability to walk and talk. It didn’t matter in any case. Dr. Soong had not instantly programmed with the ability to want that knowledge, to appreciate the intoxication of using it. Anna had done that to him. He took her face in his hands suddenly. His eyes were heavy. “You are so beautiful.”

Anna stood on her toes and buried her face in his neck. Her breathing was hurried and excited, like one on the verge of laughing. Without pulling away from him, she whispered in a muffled voice, “Do you know when I knew I wanted to be with you?”

He laughed softly, for he actually had no idea. He had been incredibly blind for so long. “No.” He whispered, “When?”

She looked up at him, “The day you saved me in the shuttle bay.”

“What?” He almost cringed, “But, I…I didn’t speak to you. I was rude to you.”

Anna just kept smiling, “I knew better.”

He leaned forward, ready to shock her with an even hungrier kiss, when he heard a sharp smack followed by a chaotic crash. Lore spun around and leaned into the corridor. John Larson knelt on the deck, frantically collecting the scattered contents of a tool kit.

“I need you to activate the backup manifold in there.” He muttered quickly. The words were directed at neither of them, but Lore could not imagine he was speaking to him. Lore glared at him coldly. For how long had he been in that corridor?

“Uh…yeah, sure, John.” Anna stepped back into the room, but hesitated, “If you have work to do in here, that’s fine—.”

“No, I’m going off duty.” Larson snapped, “Going to the station.” When he finally retrieved the last tricorder power cell from against the wall, he stuffed it into the case and forced the lid shut. He was doing everything he could not to look up, but Lore could see his face had turned a hot red. Larson spun around, hunched over the tool kit, and shuffled quickly back to the junction room. The hatch door slammed after him.
“Oh, God….” Anna sighed. “I think he heard us.”

“Does that matter?” Lore said. He hoped it didn’t.

“Yes.” She replied. Seeing the troubled look on his face, she quickly smiled, “Not because of you. It’s just not very professional in engineering, on duty. I don’t think he’ll say anything.”

Lore tried to smile, but he could not ignore the sense of dread on him. It was nothing so mystical as human intuition, it was just cold hard fact. John Larson hated him and wanted Anna. The two combined did not bode well. He took Anna’s hand, but looked down the corridor at the hatch Larson had slammed.

“I don’t have your optimism, Anna. I think Larson will be trouble for us.”

Maybe he should have written two names on that renewal scroll.

***

“Just give it to me.” Connor sneered over the bar. He had not slept in nearly two days and he was starting to feel light headed. A bit of strong coffee was the key, but in typical Ferengi fashion the bar raised the price of alcohol after a certain hour, and the bartender wanted to sell nothing else.

“Fine.” The Ferengi grunted as he turned to the replicator. In a moment a steaming cup of black espresso appeared and the bartender slammed it in front of him. “Two strips.”

“One strip.” Connor tossed the little bar at him, “I read the menu before I ordered, Ferengi.”

“Humph!” The man shoved the strip of latinum into his pocket and walked away. Connor scooped up the little cup and took a moment to stretch his eyes over the bar. The place was packed, as it seemed to be at all hours, and it was hard for him to spot her through the crowd. There were too many Bajorans to begin with, and too many of them wearing the traditional cloak and head wrap of the devout. It made him snicker a little. To a human, “devout” was not something usually coupled with intense alcohol consumption.

“Two more of those, and here’s some extra for a tip!” Came a raucous laugh.

Connor spun around, sure he must have misheard, but sure enough he saw her. At the end of the bar, Buel sat with her cloak draping to the floor, one leg of her stool trapping it. She hardly seemed to notice, though, for she rested both elbows on the bar and stared out at nothing. A truly ridiculous smile marked her face. Connor downed the espresso in a bitter gulp before elbowing his way to the end of the bar. He took her arm under her cloak.

“What the hell are you doing? Where have you been?” He fumed between clenched teeth. “Reed is waiting!”

Buel blinked several times and waved a dismissive hand at him. “You humans, always in such a hurry. A hurry to save someone, a hurry to kill someone….”

“Jesus Christ! How many have you had?”

Buel coughed over a laugh, “What’s a ja-sus?”
“Never mind.” He said, “Did you find anything, or have you just been drinking for the past five hours?”

Buel stared at him for too long, as if she hadn’t understood, but then pursed her lips irritably and dropped her elbows back on the bar. “You have idea how difficult it is to hack into Starfleet systems? I told Reed I wouldn’t be able to get past level three, and I couldn’t.”

The Ferengi bartender paused and gave Buel and suspicious look.

“Shut up!” Connor hissed through his teeth. “Are you trying to get us caught?”

She looked up at the ceiling, bending her head back to far that one would think she was about to lie down, “Yeah.” She breathed, “Maybe that’s what we should do…get caught. That would solve things nicely.”

Connor squeezed her arm painfully and shook her, “Damnit, Buel! You think we’ll end up in some cozy Federation prison for a few years? If the Bolians don’t succeed in getting us extradited, the Klingons will.”

“Come on, Andrew!” She burst suddenly. He voice cracked and her chin wrinkled up. Conner released her arm in surprise. Buel Kala did not cry…ever. She reached for his arm now and put her face close to his, “What are we going to do? What if he doesn’t succeed this time? He’s going to get us killed.”

It took Connor a moment to recover from the shocking sight of her watery eyes, and the sound of his first name on her lips. “We don’t have a choice.” He whispered, “Just tell me what you found out.”

“Nothing. It’s trial.” “Then tell him the trivia! We have to tell him something.” He said desperately. His stomach was already twisted into knots, and the espresso was suddenly not helping. “He’ll kill us, Buel. You know he will.”

“Death or a Klingon prison, huh?” She laughed humorlessly. “Fine. All I got were some stupid journal entries from the ship’s counselor and a security file about assault. Apparently our little tinker toy is ‘difficult with others’.”

“Assault?” Connor paused.

Buel turned her short glass around on the bar, “He attacked one of the Enterprise crewmen…broke the man’s nose.” She sighed heavily and picked up the glass. “Have you ever had this? It’s a human drink. Mantin? Manhattan?”

Connor took the glass from her hand and smelled it, “Agh!”

“Pfft!” Buel scoffed and took the glass back. She had not even bothered to wipe the tears from under her eyes, as if she did not know they were tre. “Don’t begrudge me a little comfort. What did you find? Oh, that’s right. You weren’t doing anything!”

Connor raised his brow and leaned close, “Oh, I found something. I saw him.”

Buel sputtered over her drink, “What? Who?”

“Lore. I saw him coming out of the Bajoran temple.”

“You imagined it.” She drawled, “What would he be doing in a Bajoran Temple? Ha! He! Now
I’m starting to refer to that thing like it’s a person!”

“It was him.” Connor insisted, “It doesn’t matter if he spotted me, he doesn’t know what I look like, but you have to be careful if he’s walking around the station. He sees you, and it’s over.”

“We have to tell Reed. If we can get this over with quickly—”

“Don’t bother.” Connor threw his hands up irritably. “You remember what he said. He doesn’t care about him. He doesn’t want him.”

“Then what the hell are we doing!” Buel cried back. She had completely forgotten herself, forgotten the room full of strangers and the eavesdropping bartender. The alcohol that coursed through her veins and made her feel heavy was only helping what she already felt: trapped.

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. I just want it to be over with, so that we can get away. We can…we can go to Bajor! What are you looking at?”

Buel had completely turned away from him and was stretching as high as she could to look over the crowd. Connor cringed, sure that Reed had come to find them, but when he followed Buel’s gaze he saw nothing, “What?”

“Look. It’s him. From the file I read!” She lifted her chin down the bar. Past the rows of Ferengi traders and Bajoran merchants, a Starfleet officer with his collar half unzipped approached the bar and pulled up one of the stools. He was alone, and looked as if he wanted to remain that way.

“Who the hell is that?” Connor asked.

Buel didn’t appear to hear him. She pulled her head wrap back and ran her fingers through her hair, making her best attempt to smooth it to some presentable fashion. When she breathed into her palm to check her breath, Connor really became concerned.

“Talk to me, Buel. What are you doing?”

“Shhh…. Just back me up and make sure everything goes ok. I think I have a solution to our little security problem. If I need to get Reed what he wants so I can get away, that’s what I’m going to do.”

Before Connor could object, or even completely understand, Buel steadied her balance and headed toward the officer at the end of the bar.
“A million little events, and the rains fall.”

“I guess that’s that.” Geordie said with a heavy sigh. He patted the data pad a few more time and placed it on the table. “One of the science stations out there sent a scout ship when they got a duress signal from a Klingon freighter. By the time they got there, the Klingons had already destroyed their attackers.”

Data picked up the data pad, although he had already read the report thoroughly, “Did they detect the isometric signature of Reed’s phaser banks?”

“Yeah.” Geordie nodded, “The Klingon freighter sustained some heavy damage too, but apparently not enough. It looks like Narok Reed finally met his match.”

Data glanced down at the tiny screen and the streaming video that played on a continuous loop. The scattered debris from Reed’s ship drifted past like slow asteroids, sizzling and sparking in odd places. “Do we know how the Klingons were able to overcome the system corruption from Reed’s computer sabotage?”

Geordie clucked his tongue in an almost humorous way, “They didn’t have to try. There was no fake distress call or ploy to get onboard. Reed just attacked them. Frontal assault.”

Data frowned, “I find it odd that Reed would have abandoned his method after having had so much success with it.” He looked over the data pad again, “It does not appear that the Klingon freighter had cargo of any particular value.”

“No.” Geordie agreed, “They were moving obsolete engine parts to be reprocessed. Even the scrap value of the tritanium wasn’t much. The science station there hasn’t completed their investigation of the wreckage yet, but the Klingons are reporting that the attack on them was… well, poorly done. Almost chaotic. I don’t think Narok Reed was playing with a full deck.”

Data had heard many euphemisms for insanity, including this one, so he let it pass without comment. Still, he could not negotiate the destruction of Reed’s ship with his prior behavior. Failed though his attempts had been, they had been cautious and thought out. “Will you inform me when the science station crew has finished the investigation of the wreckage?”

Geordie nodded, “Sure. What do you think they will find?”

“I merely wish to be certain.” Data replied. “Narok Reed has proven his ability to create false information.”

Geordie nodded begrudgingly. He, like anyone, would like to believe the obvious, but life aboard the Enterprise had taught him better, “Are you going to tell Lore?”

Data shifted his eyes for only a moment, too quickly for Geordie to notice. Several hours ago he had inquired the computer as to Lore’s location, for he felt it only necessary to share with him the letter he had received from the Federation judiciary. He had, however, decided against it upon seeing that Lore had been in Lt. Hall’s quarters all evening. “I will inform him later.” Data replied.
Geordie shrugged, “Hey, I heard about the Federation judiciary. They granted Maddox’s appeal.”

“Yes.”

“Counselor Troi told me.”

Data nodded, “I do not believe that Lore will voluntarily return to Earth.”

Geordie exhaled, “If he doesn’t, you know he can’t stay here.”

Data closed his eyes. He knew that all too well.

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Connor twisted a paper napkin in his hands until the tight coil started to shred in the center. How long had they been in there? What the Hell was she up to? He was about to turn and look at the heavy doors again, the door through which Buel had taken the light-headed Starfleet Officer some time ago, but he was blocked by the sudden appearance of the waiter. The Ferengi placed a bowl of rice and vegetables before him. Connor paid quickly and merely hung his head over the bowl. He had been hungry when he ordered it. Now, he felt sick to his stomach. Ignoring the bowl, he looked toward the door again. Surely, she wouldn’t…. Not just to get information! He clenched his fist on the table and seethed. For how long had he known Buel Kala and yet not known her at all? He had said more words to her in the past two days than he had in as many years aboard Reed’s ship. She was troubled. She had a troubling past. Then again, was there any Bajoran who didn’t?

He picked up the spoon, ready to force the nourishment on himself, when the holosuite doors opened and the Starfleet officer stepped out. Connor turned his face quickly, pretending not to notice the man, but the look he received told him it was a waste of time. The officer, his complexion waxen and red, starred at Connor for a few seconds before his cringed, turned on his heel, and made quickly for the exit. Connor stormed from the table, nearly knocking over the chair, and flew into the holosuite. Whatever program had been running was terminated, and Buel’s footsteps echoed through the wide, empty room. She was pulling her head-wrap back on and smoothing her hair underneath it.

Connor’s blood boiled, “I hope you got some good information for your trouble!”

Buel starred at him, “More than enough for the little bit of trouble. We need to talk to Reed right away.”

Connor turned away, for he was finding it hard to explain the pain in his chest. It was stabbing him, as if someone had taken a knife under his ribcage and was making little cuts at his heart. “I suppose you don’t hate humans as much as you’ve said.” He sneered. He wanted her to feel embarrassed, ashamed, something! Anything other than that calm, professional look on her face!

Buel cupped her hands over her face and groaned. Clearly the several dark Manhattans she had consumed were beginning to wear off, “What are you talking about?”

“That!” He pointed angrily in the direction of the door. “We could have drugged him and taken him to Reed. We could have gotten something out of him without you giving him—without you
having to do that!"

The look on Buel’s face was the kind of genuine confusion that comes from seeing something truly bizarre. She shook her head, about to question him, but her eyes widened as she suddenly understood, “For Prophet’s sake, I didn’t sleep with him! Is that what you’re thinking?”

Connor held his breath and examined her. Why had the pain in his chest suddenly ceased?
“You…. Then, why did you bring him to a holosuite—?”

“I needed a way to keep him restrained if he panicked. It was a long shot that he would help us at all, and I couldn’t risk him taking off the minute he heard something he didn’t like.” Buel countered. She took a step forward and gave him a curious look, “What do you care, anyway?”

“I don’t!” Connor bellowed. He reached for her arm and began pulling her toward the exit. “We have to get back and tell Reed everything. What did you get?”

Buel continued to stare at him as they made their way onto the promenade. She did not know where to begin.

“You two had better be on your way to see me.”

Buel spun around like a top, breaking Connor’s hold on her arm. She gripped the edges of her robe and opened her mouth to speak, but her throat locked up like a vice. Leaning against the bar window with his arms folded across his chest, Reed eyed both of them suspiciously.

“You shouldn’t be out here.” Connor said as he came forward, “I said we would come back.”

“Yes.” Reed looked up at the ceiling and smiled in a strange, humorless way, “I know how trustworthy the word of a professional thief can be.”

Connor almost stepped forward, but his sense of self-preservation was stronger than his sense of pride. He clenched his teeth, “We should go back to the shuttle. Now.”

“Worried about my safety, Connor?” Reed stepped away from the window and toward them, too close for comfort. “Wouldn’t it solve all of your problems if I was arrested right now?”

“No.” Buel said. She thrust he chin up defiantly and glared at him, “You would turn us in too, just for spite.”

Reed belted a laugh, shocking Buel enough to make her step away. She felt Connor’s hand lay against her back.

“I always knew you were smart, Buel. Let’s see how smart you’ve been today.” He moved very close to her and looked down. His nose wrinkled up, “And I would stay away the alcohol, if I were you. Everyone knows Bajorans can’t hold their liquor.”

“You son of—” Buel had to force air into her lungs, for anger had always had such a physical affect on her. She was so enraged that her eyes began to water, “I got more than you hoped for, damnit! You’ll get what you want, whatever that is, and then it’s over. I’ll never see your miserable face again!”

Buel managed to scream without ever raised her voice. Her eyes were wide and straining, red just as much from drink as from exhaustion. Connor grabbed the back of her robes and pulled her back. He stepped between her and Reed.
Reed didn’t look angry. In fact, his face barely changed as he spoke, “You have no idea how right you are.”

***

“So, I’ve convinced Captain Picard to hold a welcoming banquet for the Betazoid Ambassador aboard the Enterprise. Can you believe it!” The station manager looked over his pad and busily jotted down notes. His assistant could barely keep up with his pace.

“So, I should have all those decorations moved to the Enterprise?” Lana asked. She tried not to sound too despondent, but she had already spent hours setting up the elaborate décor.

“Yes, yes, have personnel send some people to help you.” Shaw slowed and frowned, “I hope there won’t be too many problems with the odd timing. Fifteen hundred hours…it’s such an odd time for a banquet.”

Lana shrugged, “The Ambassador is still on Bolian time. I assumed you wouldn’t want her to experience a stressful time lag.”

David Shawn smiled, “Jet lag.”

“Jet lag?”

“A euphemism from earth history, when air travel created time lags for the first time. Anyway, did you give the security profile to Commander Worf?”

“Yes.” Lana sighed. “He didn’t like it. He said the Enterprise is not some ‘Orion flea market’.”

“Oh.” Shaw stopped and rubbed his chin thoughtfully, “But he didn’t object, to the decreased security, I mean? After all, I can’t have high profile diplomats being scrutinized like criminals.”

“Of course he objected.” Lana rolled her eyes, “If that man had his way, there would no guests aboard the Enterprise. Ever. Still, Captain Picard agreed. He said the reason they had for their increased security wasn’t an issue anymore. Do you know what he meant by that?”

Shaw considered. He knew that the Enterprise’s increased security measures had been due to the fugitive Narok Reed. If the Captain had agreed to lift them so easily, they must have received good news. “I suppose that fugitive they were looking for got caught. Between you and me, Lana, I don’t understand why Captain Picard let it go so far with that android. He should have turned him over.”

Lana looked up, shocked, “To negotiate with terrorists? Starfleet couldn’t do that, no matter what this Reed character was asking for.”

Shaw grunted, “Yes, but it isn’t very often that they demand something you’d like to be rid of anyway.”

Lana rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to her pad. “So, did you want replicated hors d’oeuvres, or should I order some from the shops?”

***
“Mother, it’s a burden. The crew has been under a lot of stress, and I know the Captain is exhausted—”

“Oh, nonsense, Little One.” Lwaxana Troi, the honorable ambassador from Betazed and the holder of the sacred challis of Reese, draped a sheer scarf over her shoulder and examined it in the mirror. She could see her daughter’s reflection in the glass, and it was not approving. “You worry too much, Diana. If the crew is so stressed, they could do with a little frivolity. The Bolian ambassador will be there. A frightfully dull man, but he does hilarious impressions.”

“You had plans to have the reception on the station. Why change them now?” Diana Troi sighed and fell into an arm chair. She should have known that her mother would be at Starbase Seventy-Four, for she had mentioned as much in her last letter, but Diana Troi could not be expected to remember every detail of her mother’s boggling schedule.

“Darling, do you have any idea how many requests I have had for tours since everyone found out you were docked? It’s just easier this way, and saves me a lot of time, and even more demands on your Captain. He can meet everyone at once, instead of a dozen people bothering him for two or three days. Besides,” She shook her head and repositioned a few expert curls, “The view is better from Ten Forward.”

“The personnel on the station will have to move all the decorations, Ten Forward will have to be shut down,” Troi shook her head, “And security will have to be put in place for your guests. It’s just all so—.”

“‘A million little events, and the rains fall’, isn’t that right?” Lwaxana chuckled, “I can’t very well change my mind now. That would just be more work for everyone. Here, Darling. Put on a pretty dress, fix your hair, and have some fun.”

“I will be wearing my dress uniform.” Troi retorted.

“Agh!” Lwaxana cringed, “Whoever designed that boxy, white-topped monstrosity ought to be shot!”

“I’ll see you at fifteen hundred hours, Mother.”

***

“Is this some kind of joke? I’m not going.” LaForge waved his hand irritably and knelt back down in front of his open console. It looked like a wounded animal, for the electrical innards were scattered over half the floor.

“Don’t worry. The Captain is being very lenient with the guest list, considering.” Riker grumbled.

LaForge looked up, “But not lenient enough to excuse the First Officer?”

“No.” Riker exhaled heavily. No matter how many times he met Lwaxana Troi it never got any easier, and he wasn’t looking forward to it now. The woman seemed to relish embarrassing him with offhanded comments about his thoughts, and half the time he was sure he didn’t think of
something until after she had mentioned it. At times, it felt like a set up. “It shouldn’t last very long. You know these diplomats get tired of each other nearly as quickly as we get tired of them.”

LaForge laughed, “Yeah, you hope.”

Riker chuckled thoughtfully, “I hate to say it, but couldn’t Narok Reed have managed to avoid destruction for just a few more hours. He were still alive, we could have used security measures as an excuse and gotten out of this damn thing.”

“What security measures are we on now? I didn’t think Worf would change them so quickly.” LaForge asked, his voice echoing from inside the console.

“Standard protocols for a friendly port. Worf has stationed officers at sensitive areas to keep the curious where they belong, but other than that it’s going to be a circus. He objected, believe me, but with the high profile guests for this banquet…. Riker said.

“Great.” LaForge muttered. He reached far into the console, but paused with a new thought, “What about Lore? If there’s going to be so many people walking around the corridors, shouldn’t he be…out of sight?”

Riker smiled, an action that amazed him as much as Geordie. It had been so long since Lore came aboard—nearly eight months now—that he had nearly forgotten the shocking feeling of encountering him. The Enterprise guests would experience it anew. He looked down and considered, “Actually, I haven’t seen Lore in hours.”

LaForge shrugged, “It doesn’t matter. Hall is scheduled for the maintenance shift at sixteen hundred hours, so Lore will be in engineering anyway. Since that’s off-limits to visitors, there shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll just assign them to something that doesn’t require them to go anywhere.”

Riker smiled again, only this time it was at something else, “So…Lore spends most of his time with Lt. Hall?”

Geordie pulled his head from under the console and gave Riker a curious look, “You really should spend some more time in engineering, Commander. Oh, hey! Larson!” Geordie pulled himself from under the console and looked past Riker. Lt. Larson stopped dead in his tracks and gave Geordie a startled look.

“Yes, Sir?” Larson rattled.

“I was wondering if you would be willing to switch shifts with Briggs tonight. He only has one more plasma refit on his training roster until he fully qualified, and we’re doing one in the morning.”

Larson opened his mouth and blinked several times. Thinking hard, he looked up for several seconds, then nodded, “Yes, that’s fine. That works.”

“Okay, then.” Geordie replied slowly, wondering at the man’s addled manner. He watched as Larson hurried off across the bay and into one of the junction rooms. As soon as he was gone, Geordie shook his head sadly and scoffed. “I really hate to admit it, Sir, and it’s just between you and me, but…Larson deserved that punch in the nose.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” Riker said, “Personally, I can’t see a fight that unequal as being deserved.”
Geordie merely bit his lip and turned back to his console. If Riker wasn’t aware of the harsh comments Larson had made, and which had driven Lore to attack him, he saw no reason to spread them. “I guess you have a point. I’ll be sure to keep Lore out of the way. Seems to me you’ll have enough trouble up there as it is.” Geordie could not help but shoot Riker an amused glance.

“Thanks, Geordie.” Riker grunted. He turned away and headed for what he was sure would be a dull and trying afternoon.
Chapter 44

“I'm not Data.”

“Hello, Counselor.”

“Lore.” She nodded. Troi looked over him curiously as she stepped into the lift and called for deck five. “You are in a very good mood today.”

Lore smiled. How lucky he was that telepaths couldn’t read his mind. Reading emotions was bad enough. “I am in a good mood. Aren’t you?”

She raised a brow, “Should I be?”

“Aren’t you on your way to see Riker?” He said with a smile.

Troy laughed and faced the door. Her porcelain cheeks flushed a bit, “Are you trying to embarrass me, Lore, or ask advice?”

“Advice? I don’t need advice about anything.” He said, his tone coy and meaningful. He had no idea what he meant, but he knew that humans hated that tone. It always got their imaginations going.

“Mmm, I see.” She smiled too, “Well, good luck, then.”

“Good luck with what?” He looked at her with sudden suspiciously. Did she know something? Had she spoken to Larson?

Troi shrugged. “I have no idea. I’m just trying to be as vaguely insinuative as you. It’s rather fun, actually.”

Lore laughed to himself and faced the door again. It was hard to imagine he had ever disliked Diana Troi.

“Are you going to see Lt. Hall?” She asked, her voice a mock of his own tone.

“Yes.” He said proudly. “Are you going to see Riker?”

She tried not to smile, “Yes.”

They were both silent for a time, taking some amusement in each other’s private revelations, when Troi turned to him with a more serious note, “Data received a message from Captain Maddox. His appeal to the Federation court was granted a hearing.”

Lore shrugged.

“That doesn’t concern you?” She pressed.

“It would concern me if I had any intention of appearing for it. I don’t.”
"Lore…." She shook her head, "I think you will find life much more difficult when it isn’t lived just for yourself. Maddox could make it impossible for you to remain aboard the Enterprise."

*What?* He was sure not to show anything on his face, "That won’t happen."

Troi continued to face the door. She knew when to stop, and even if she could convince him otherwise she saw no reason to. He was happy. The lift stopped and Troi looked over her shoulder as she left, "Good night, Lore."

He laughed at her meaningful tone, "You too, Counselor."

As the lift continued on, Lore felt a renewed sense of exhilaration that he had managed to keep at bay the last seven hours. Unable to keep Anna to himself in engineering, he had decided it was best to help Data after all, and had given himself some distraction until he could be alone with her. Now that he was on his way to her quarters he felt slightly uneasy, as if he were not sure of what he was doing.

This time he did not bother to linger in the corridor until crewmen passed, nor continue on and double back when the area was clear. He had done such things before, fearing that Anna’s colleagues would punish her for their friendship, but he no longer felt the need. Anna had made it clear that she had no intention of hiding, and their encounter with Larson that morning had pretty much guaranteed public knowledge. He moved directly to Anna’s door and pressed the chime, giving only a fleeting glance to the pair of science officers who moved past.

The door swished open, but Anna was not there. He heard multiple voices in the room, and leaned in cautiously. Anna stood on the other side of her desk, brushing her hair in long strokes and looking at the open screen of her computer. She shot Lore a quick glance and pressed her finger over her lips, bidding him to be quiet.

"Well, Angie has been sick all week, and you know Mom can’t stand taking them to the doctor for every little thing. She thinks it makes people weak, never being sick. Did you get Mom’s letter? I bet she talked your head off about her new holonovel….”

Lore raised his eyebrows at the rapid-fire female voice coming through the computer. It continued to speak as Anna looked his way and rolled her eyes.

"…and he said that I—. Hey, hey! The monitor, Annie, I saw you roll your eyes!"

"Sorry." Anna said with a smirk, "I did get Mom’s letter, yes, and she did talk mostly about the holonovel."

"Uh huh, well it’s one of those ‘strict-interactive’ ones, and it’s Victorian, so Angie just hates it. You know that old ‘children should speak when they’re spoken too’ thing? Well, Angie wasn’t in there for ten minutes before she came out crying. Said the characters were mean to her and something about ‘boxing her ears’. What does that mean?"

Lore listened in rapt fascination, for he had quickly gathered that this woman was a member of Anna’s family. Anna sighed. There was no telling how long she had been listening to the warp one chatter of this woman. She looked at Lore and mouthed the words: *Sorry. Just a minute.*

"Hey, is there someone there with you? I saw you talking."

Anna shrugged, "What were you saying about Angie being sick?"

"What? Oh, yeah! Well, she was playing in the woods in that old World War Three bunker. I
“Keep telling the mayor he needs to have that thing sealed up, but he keeps giving me some historical preservation crap, and Angie and her friends were in there without jackets and now she has a terrible cold....”

Lore walked right behind the desk and traced his fingers over the top of the computer screen. He gave Anna a coy smile, with only a bit of schadenfreude. He had to admit, though, that he was terribly curious about the woman on the screen, but he did not dare to enter the view. What Anna’s family knew or did not know was her decision.

“Look! Aunt Annie! I got a new wool hat for my birthday!”

Lore’s eyes widened at the high pitched little voice. It fought with the other woman’s.

“Shhh, Angie! Mommy’s talking!” The woman scolded, “Anyway, are you coming home this winter? Beth said she got a letter from you that she didn’t like, but the old cow wouldn’t tell me what’s in it! You wouldn’t share bad news with her and not me, would you?”

Anna glanced up at Lore and smiled, “It wasn’t bad news.”

“Then what? All she told me was ‘I don’t believe this’ and ‘Anna’s lost her mind’, blah, blah, blah. You know her, it’s like talking to one of the empty uniforms in that damn museum of her’s—Ooh! The baby’s kicking again.”

Anna chewed her lip in a moment of consideration. Looking up at Lore again, she waved her hand at him, “Come here.”

Lore shook his head and mouthed, No. You don’t have to do that.

She shook her head and reached over the computer to grab his hand. Reluctantly, he walked around the desk and leaned in front of the screen, “Hello.”

The woman on the screen sat a distance from her own computer, allowing her whole figure to be seen. She sat at a small table strewn with flowers and a few empty vases, clearly in the midst of some artistic endeavor. She had long, bright blonde hair, and a full pink knit dress stretched over a very large, very pregnant belly.

“Oh! Oh, my God!” With a bright smile, she managed to heft herself out of her chair and waddle the short distance to be closer to the screen. She leaned in as if she could actually peer into the room, “Annie! I didn’t know you knew Lieutenant Commander Data! Oh, sorry, sorry. It’s Commander now, right?”

“Amy, no....”

“....I mean, I knew Annie served on the Enterprise, of course. But she’s just a lieutenant engineer whatever. I wouldn’t have expected her to even talk to any of the senior staff and—Oh, my God! Do you know Captain Picard too? Angie did him for hero’s week at school.”

Lore glanced at Anna with some pity. He had his problems with his own family, but Data was nothing like this. “Actually,” He said softly, calmly to the screen, “I’m not Data.”

Amy chuckled at the screen for a moment before her bright, painfully exuberant smile faded a bit. “You’re, um...what’s that?”

Lore gathered himself. This wasn’t some nameless crewman staring at him rudely, nor complete stranger from the station. He reached below the table and took Anna’s hand, “My name
is Lore.”

“Lore, bore, sore, tore, snore! Ha ha!” The little girl bounced behind her mother’s back with a stuffed creature of some kind, flapping it around wildly and moving its arms. “Lore, bore, more, banana-fanna-fo-for, me my—.”

“Angie!” Amy’s voice pierced through the room like a dagger, forcing Anna to wince. Little Angie stopped instantly before her face started to grow pink with a flood of tears. She threw her little toy to the floor and fled off-screen. Amy turned back to the screen, but appeared to be leaning away from it, as if she were no longer certain the thing was safe, “Um…Annie is this some kind of joke? I mean…isn’t Lore that other one?”

Anna frowned, “You know who Lore is, Amy.”

The frozen look on Amy’s face didn’t appear to be melting, and Lore looked with some concern between Anna and the shock on the screen. Slowly, he could see the blood rising in Anna’s face, and she shifted her weight as if she might fall. It wasn’t fair. She should not have to do this for him. He straightened his posture suddenly and made a soft smile, “We got you! I believe that is the appropriate saying to accompany a prank, despite the grammatical inaccuracies?”

Amy blinked and peered deeper into the screen, “Huh?”

“Lt. Hall wished me to assist her in her prank. Did I do well?” He heard Anna’s fumbled objection and squeezed her hand quickly.

“Prank? I…oh. Oh!” Amy laughed and leaned over so far that her forehead touched the table. “I knew it! I knew it had to be something. Wait until I tell Mom about this. Agh! You nearly had me freaking out!”

Lore released Anna’s hand slowly, “It was good meeting you, Amy. I must go.”

“Oh, okay!” She laughed cheerfully, “Yeah, I’m gonna tell everyone I talked to you!”

Lore merely nodded and stepped quickly off screen. Anna turned her face away for a moment and pretended to rub her forehead with her sleeve. When she turned back she had a forced smile on. “I did get you good. Consider it pay back for that dinner party last time I visited.”

“Oh, come on! You could have hit it off with Luke if you had just bothered to try!”

“I don’t appreciate blind dates, and certainly not blind dates unannounced. Now we’re even.”

“Fine, fine. Look, I got to get going. Angie breaks stuff when she’s upset. Honey! Come back! Mommy didn’t mean to yell! I’ll talk to you later, Annie. Bye.”

“Bye.” Anna grabbed the back of the monitor and slowly folded it down. The computer sank into the desktop, leaving only a thin square seam on the smooth surface. Anna fell into her desk chair and folded her arms over the table, “You didn’t have to do that.”

Lore shook his head, “Neither did you.”

“They’re going to find out eventually.”

“Eventually, then, but not today.” He stood before her chair and gripped each armrest as he leaned down over her. She smiled, though it looked as if she were trying not to. “I would rather spend today with you, rather than you spend it explaining your bad decisions to your family.”
“Bad decisions?”

He shrugged, “Even I can’t call it a good decision.”

She frowned and rested her hand on his, “How can you say that?”

He did not want to say it, but the truth was too plain to be avoided. The mere look on Amy’s face had confirmed that. “I don’t see any point in telling you what others must have told you repeatedly by now.”

“I don’t care what people think!” She burst suddenly. She pushed her way out of the chair and Lore did not block her. She walked swiftly to the replicator and stood in front of it for a few seconds. Eventually, she sighed, “Just water.”

The machine whirled and Anna took the glass to the sofa, where she folded her legs underneath her and cradled the glass in her lap.

Lore remained near the desk, “Would you like me to leave?”

“No!” Anna set the glass on the table and rose. She came to him and placed her hands on his shoulders. Almost instinctually, he laid his hands on her waist and pulled her closer.

“Good. I don’t want to leave.”

Anna stretched up a bit and kissed him once on the cheek. “Come here. I’m so tired.” Taking his hand, she pulled him toward the sofa and took a seat. Lore smiled suddenly, for the most amazing idea had just occurred to him. It had been thought of and done by countless billions of men before him, but for him the novelty made it genius. He took a seat closer to the arm of the sofa and, in one easy motion, took Anna around the waist and pulled her snuggly against him.

Anna gasped and immediately tilted her head back, smiling at him upside-down. “I don’t appreciate the gratuitous show of strength.”

“You don’t?” He said, pretending to be sad. “But that’s my best characteristic.”

“No it isn’t.” Anna turned her face half into his shoulder and exhaled. Her muscles started to relax as she sank against him. “It might be third or fourth, but definitely not first.”

Lore looked out the window at the busy station outside. He had always liked the views at space-dock. Even all those years ago when he might have been planning to destroy whatever station he was at, he still liked it. He imagined a fish tank, like the one in Picard’s office, only this one was filled with little ships, and people moving past windows thousands of yards away. He laid his hands on Anna’s waist and closed his eyes, feeling with some relish the tiny signatures of life. He could feel the warmth through her uniform, and the nearly imperceptible movement of blood through her veins. Her heart produced a vibration that traveled the length of her body every time it beat, even if it was so subtle that she could not tell. It was difficult for him to imagine that at one time he would have been utterly disgusted by such things. His perfect memory would not allow him to forget that he had once looked at the Borg and seen their only imperfection as their need for flesh and blood—weak, imperfect flesh and blood. Now, he opened his eyes and tilted his head close to Anna’s neck, smelling the sunflower scent of her hair and the mild saltiness of human skin, and felt his hold tighten on her. Flesh and blood—beautiful, perfect flesh and blood.

“I’m sorry.” He muttered suddenly, very close to her ear.

Anna waited a moment and turned, “Sorry for what?”
He really wasn’t apologizing to her, but to the whole of humanity. He was apologizing for having such a hard, ignorant view of the entire realm of organic life, even if most of them still irritated him to no end. He shrugged, “For the way I treated you when we first met. I’m sure you haven’t forgotten.”

“Ah…” She snuggled in and closed her eyes, “Maybe you shouldn’t apologize. Maybe I wouldn’t have been nearly as interested in you if you had been nice and trying to make everyone like you.”

He blinked, “Why is that?”

“Because it would have been dishonest. No one would have bought that, and I doubt they would have kept you on board for long. You know what they say: Never trust the Ferengi giving away free samples.”

“Agh!” He laughed at the ceiling, only a little outraged, “I’m compared to a Ferengi, then?”

Anna laughed, “No. You’re ears are much more attractive, but you being sweet and civil would be just as unlikely at a generous Ferengi.” She paused, and looked up at him, “I hope you don’t think that’s an insult.”

“I don’t.” He bent his head down again, ready to resume his slow exploration of her neck, when another thought occurred to him, “What do you mean you wouldn’t have been as ‘interested’ in me? You were interested?”

Anna cleared her throat, “Mmm…did I say that? My tongue must have slipped—Oh!”

Lore buried his face against her neck suddenly, laughing as he tickled her with strong kisses. Anna fidgeted and laughed. He had never done such a thing in his entire life, but how amazing it was! She egged him on while begging him to stop; a mixture of the two best pleasures.

“Stop it! I—oh! I can’t breathe!” She managed to twist herself around and grab both his wrists, as if she actually had the strength to keep them there. She put her face close to his and narrowed her eyes menacingly, “Don’t make me tickle you back.”

Lore smirked, “Sorry. I’m not ticklish.”

“Then I’ll just have to hit you.” She said, dropping his hand and draping her arms over his shoulders.

“Sorry. I don’t feel pain.”

Anna laughed, but she tilted her head down in a curious fashion, as if she did not want him to see her face. After a moment she looked up again and touched his cheek gently. “If you don’t feel pain, does that mean you don’t…feel anything?”

Lore closed his eyes for a moment and was unable to stop a smile. It only made sense that she would wonder. He took her hand and brought it to his lips. He kissed her fingers several times.

“No, that is not what that means.”

She sighed happily and leaned forward, ready to fall completely against him, but she grumbled suddenly and placed her foot on the floor, “Mmm…excuse me.”

Lore grabbed her hand as she stood, “Don’t leave.”
“I have to.” She shifted her eyes toward the bathroom and shrugged, “Human necessity.”

“Ah.” He released her hand and stood as well. “Of course.”

Anna hurried off to the bathroom. The door hissed closed behind her. Lore moved slowly through the room, back toward the desk and the bookshelves. He was so accustomed to humans tiptoeing around his mechanical nature that he hadn’t considered that humans might find their own organic natures to be embarrassing. With some amusement he smiled and let his eyes drift over the windows again. The station outside was like a great steel coral reef, with every manner of creature and machine moving around one another. They were all perfectly illuminated, but only a small amount of light penetrated the room. A single sharp beam from a passing maintenance cruiser ran across Anna’s bed in a slow crawl, creating shadows in the hills and valleys of the rumpled quilt. Lore reached forward and brushed his hand over the blanket, the same one that had featured in his dream, the same one on which Anna had slept in a non-existent forest. The cotton was smooth as satin, having been worn to a high polish over years of use.

The bathroom door opened and Lore felt a pair of hands move slowly around his waist, hugging him tightly. The bare, ivory skin of Anna’s arms caught his breath, and he turned around. She had shed her uniform, replacing it with the same sleeveless red shirt and soft grey pants he had seen her in only once before; the night she had helped him repair his shoulder. He smiled suddenly. If only he could have appreciated then the warmth of her hand on his skin, the strange excitement of her hair brushing over his shoulder.

“What are you smiling about?” She whispered.

“Many things.” He replied. He put his arms around her and lifted her into a deep kiss. He didn’t mean to do it, or perhaps he did, but he slowly pulled her along with him as he stepped back to the edge of the bed. He stopped when he felt the cushions press against the back of his legs, and the fabric rustled quietly. Desire was something he had known before—the desire for revenge, the desire for power—but he had never known anything like this. He tightened his arms around her until he had to remind himself to be careful. She was fragile, after all.

Anna drew her arms down from his shoulders and pressed her hands against his chest. It was strange how she could press against him and yet seem to be pulling him closer at the same time. Slowly, she worked the fabric of his sweater up with her fingers and laid her hands against his bare chest.

Lore gasped and broke his kiss in a clumsy fashion. He laughed immediately. “You surprised me,” He whispered.

“Good.” She whispered back. Her eyes were intense and her smile was gone. When Lore met them he could not help but stay fixed, for no one had ever looked at him like that. Her heartbeat was strong and fast and her breathing had become unsteady. Lore could feel his own alien version of unease overpowering him. He slid his hands down her waist and stopped at the sudden curve of her hips. It was a shock, a sudden, intense shock that seemed to come from nothing but was as real as a jolt. He smiled and whispered close to her ear, “I don’t want to leave.”

Anna drew her hands down his chest slowly, purposefully, before she wrapped her arms around him again. She kissed the space under his ear and chuckled, “Then don’t.”

Lore closed his eyes and listened to soft rustle of the sheets as Anna took his hand and pulled him onto the bed.
“Why, Lt. Hall, what is so funny?”

“If I have to tell one more of those diplomats where to find the airlock, I think I’m going to scream.” The man muttered in a deep, tired voice.

“You know what, don’t get me started.” Replied his female companion. “Lt. Worf had me running interference to keep them away from the bridge for the past two hours. It’s like they think this ship is some kind of playground.”

“How long is this banquet supposed to last, anyway?”

“Who knows? If the conversations I heard in the lift are any indication, these people love hearing themselves talk. The Theralian ambassador doesn’t like universal translators though, so you should hear him try to speak English…. Hey, you want to hear something really crazy?” The woman dropped her voice to a whisper, “I heard one of the diplomats in the turbo lift—I think it was the Farian ambassador—say that he hoped he would get a chance to glimpse Lore.”

“Glimpse?” Her male companion laughed.

“Hey, I’m giving a direct quote. He said, ‘I do hope I get a chance to glimpse Lore, if just for a moment.’” She mimicked the quote in a deep, exaggerated voice and laughed, “Can you believe that?”

“No. You don’t think he would actually be there, do you? I mean, at the banquet with all those VIPs?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” She woman replied.

Don’t hold your breath. Lore listened intently as their voices became distant and faded away with each step. He had heard their every word since they emerged from the turbo-lift, for to ears such as his the bulkeds were made of rice paper. In fact, he had been listening for some time, and making quite an interesting sport of it too. Ensign Blake, whose quarters were one deck below, was apparently infatuated with one of the attendants in Ten Forward, but he was convinced she would turn him down. The woman across the corridor was an ardent fan of Cardassian operettas, and her ability to sing along proved it. But neither made him smile so much as the frantic security officer realizing that he had submitted the wrong report to Lt. Worf.

Of course, it was not all amusing or even interesting. He was just filling the hours until Anna opened her eyes. She lay on her side next to him, her tranquil face resting on the soft pillow. He delighted in the way her hair kept falling over her shoulders even though she hardly moved, and how at times he was sure he saw her smile. For the fifth time in an hour, he reached out and brushed his fingers over her upturned palm. She stirred slightly, but sank back into the pillow once more.

Amazing…

Lore could hardly think of a time when humans did not annoy him, or when they did not in fact
bore him. They still did, mostly, but Anna fascinated him. Recent memories ran through his mind, so vivid that it was as if he could still feel her warm skin against his, and still hear her soft voice in his ear.

“Anna.” He whispered and rested his hand on her arm. He wasn’t sure if waking her was necessary, for he was finding much entertainment in the private conversations of the ship, but he wanted to hear her voice and see her smile.

“Anna.” He whispered again, and slowly lifted himself to kiss her. “Wake up.”

She rolled onto her back and opened her eyes in a few groggy stages. She made a much exaggerated stretch and yawned. As soon as her eyes rested on his she smiled and touched his arm.

“You stayed.” She whispered, for the dark room encouraged quiet.

“Why would I leave?” He said, and leaned down to kiss her once more.

“It can’t be interesting to watch me sleep.” She said through a yawn, “Don’t you get bored?”

He ran his fingers around the edge of her ear, “It’s difficult to be bored when I have three decks full of people who won’t shut up. Besides, I like watching you sleep.”

She seemed to like that, and smiled as she turned her face back into the pillow. “What time is it?”

Lore smirked to himself and thought of a delightful idea. “Sixteen-thirty.”

Anna nodded absently and stretched again before her eyes suddenly shot open, “What? No!” She pushed the blankets back and scooted to the edge of the bed, “Commander LaForge is looking for me!”

“Really?” Lore shrugged and laid his head back on the pillow as if he intended to sleep. “Why would he do that?”

“I was supposed to be in engineering thirty minutes ago!” She fumbled over the edge of the bed and pulled one of the sheets along, wrapping it around her like a clumsy toga. She darted her eyes over the floor worriedly, “I’ve never been late. Not once!”

“Why are you so worried?” Lore asked casually. He didn’t have to hide his smile, for Anna was so frantically moving around the room that she wasn’t looking at him.

“Because LaForge could call me any second.” She knelt down next to the bed and began pulling articles of clothing from the drawer there. Her sheet began slowly slipping down to the floor.

Lore could resist no longer, “He wouldn’t do that. You’re not late.”

Anna stood, her hands brimming with clothes, “What…?”

He gave her a broad smile, “Did I say it was sixteen-thirty? I meant fourteen-thirty.”

Her eyes narrowed for a moment, then she dropped the pile of clothes, and the sheet, to the floor, “I hate you.”

“You love me.”

“I guess. But if you’re going to wake me up, then you’re getting up too!” Anna grabbed the
blankets at the foot of the bed and tugged. She was trying to look angry, but her laughs gave her away.

Lore easily held the quilt in place, and even pulled it snuggly up to his ears, “Why, Lt. Hall! You might see me naked. I have my virtue to consider!”

“Ha!” Anna tugged and laughed even harder. Lore pulled the blanket over his head and was still as a stone, but even he could not keep up the play forever. Her delightful laugh and uncovered form were far too distracting. He sat up and stretched toward the end of the bed. With one effortless motion he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back forward. She sank into the sheets beside him.

“I’m going to get fed up with this whole over-powering thing.” She said.

“But everyone is stronger than you.” He teased, and leaned down to kiss the curve of her neck.

“True, but with you it’s over-kill.” She grabbed his wrists playfully and pushed him back as she sat up. He allowed it. “See? At least if I really try, I can win.”

Lore lay back against the pillows and stared at her with absolutely open eyes. He could recall no time in his life when he had felt comfortable enough to look at someone’s eyes so openly, save the many instances in which he had meant to intimidate someone. There was no intimidation here, and the only thing more remarkable than his own absolutely comfort was hers’. She smiled down at him, and he noticed how her eyes so often swept over the rest of him. He smiled as Anna straddled over him and pressed his wrists down on his chest.

“There!” She exclaimed, “Now you’re trapped.”

He caressed her hands even as she held them, and could not help but examine the light from the windows as it passed over her naked body in slow swipes. Fine. It wasn’t the light he was examining. “I’m warning you, Anna.” He said heavily.

She shrugged and tightened her grip on his wrists, “Warning me of what?”

He laughed and disengaged his hands from her hold, placing them on her hips. As he drew his hands back, preparing to pull her down in another playful volley, he stopped, for a slow stream of light had moved past the window and over her side. At the top of her thighs, a wide, brownish-blue discoloration marked her ivory skin. The shape was ambiguous, save the obvious pressure points of five strong fingers. Lore ran his fingers lightly over the mark, “Speaking of over-powering….”

Anna looked around to see what he was looking at. “Oh.” She drew a deep breath, “I… didn’t notice.”

“Neither did I.” He drew his hand slowly away from the spot, his touch so light that he barely held her, “I’m sorry.”

Anna lifted his hand to her lips and kissed his fingers, “Don’t apologize. There’s nothing wrong with losing a little control.”

He closed his eyes and indulged in his memory. A happy smile crossed his lips, “What makes you say I lost control?”

“I have ears.”

Lore’s breath caught and he closed his eyes. Embarrassment he knew, but modesty was
something else, and he felt the bizarre urge to reach up and cover his face.

“Why, Lore! I believe you are blushing,” Anna teased.

“Unlikely.” He assured her.

“Oh, no, no. I can see it.” She laughed, “Just a touch of red, right there.” She laughed more, but her expression softened as she looked down at him. She gripped his hands, “I should have told you a long time ago, you know.”

Lore knew what she meant right away, “Why didn’t you?”

“I, eh….” She smiled and tapped her fingers on his chest, “I didn’t know if you were interested.”

“In you?” He said with disbelief. How could anyone not be interested in her? He could hardly accept that he had ever not been in love with her.

“No. I didn’t know if you were interested…at all. In women, in…this.” She leaned down and kissed him several times, dragging her hair over his shoulders. She said far more by that than by words, and it was clear that she felt uncomfortable admitted the thought.

“I didn’t think that I was.” He whispered. He wrapped his arms around her and just held her tightly. How could it be that the warmth from her body made him feel so much better, when he had never known what it was like to be cold? He looked past her for a moment and over the darkened room. He saw the books on the shelves, the picture frames, and the uniform thrown over the desk chair. He thought of his empty assigned quarters, where the floors were still dirty with glass and splinters of artificial wood, where the only indication of occupancy was the book Anna had given to him. He could not see himself in that room again. The entire idea of going there was absurd. This was his home. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her down against him. Anna snuggled her face into his shoulder and spoke before he could.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“LaForge to Lt. Hall.”

Lore groaned loudly.

“Mmm.” Anna sighed and reached over Lore’s head toward the little communicator on the sill. She picked it up and sank back into her former position.

“I hate that—”

Anna covered Lore’s mouth with her hand and stifled a laugh. “Shhh. Go ahead, Commander.”

“I know you’re not on duty for about an hour, but I could really use your help with the chamber lining install. Briggs isn’t qualified yet.”

Lore rolled his eyes and muttered, but Anna’s hands stilled his words. She pressed a playful kiss to his nose and tapped the comm badge against, “I was under the impression that Carlson was heading up the install.”

“He was, but…” LaForge drew out his words, “His wife went into labor ten minutes ago.
You’ve never seen anyone run that fast to sickbay.”

“Oh.” Anna bit her lower lip and looked at Lore. He slid his hands slowly up and down her back, and wrinkled his forehead into the most pathetic look of pleading. Anna laughed and sighed, “I’ll be right there, Sir.”

“Thanks, Hall. We’ll be waiting. LaForge out.”

Anna drew her hand away from Lore’s mouth, “Duty calls.”

“That must be LaForge’s middle name.” He grumbled. He sat up, easily lifting Anna with him, and ran his fingers through her hair. He knew he wasn’t being very helpful, but he just…couldn’t help it. He began kissing her neck and shoulders in a slow, sensual line. It did not take long for her breathing to deepen and her heart to speed up, a fact that pleased him in more ways than one.

“You aren’t being very helpful.” She sighed.

He laughed, “I know.”

Anna kindly, but firmly pushed him away. She cupped his face in her hands and smiled at him, “We have to go.”

“If you insist.” He said, and reluctantly released her. Anna slid off the back of the bed and walked slowly toward the bathroom. She shot him a bright smile over her shoulder before she disappeared behind the door.

Lore placed his feet on the floor and stood. As he walked across the room he stepped over Anna’s undershirt and his black sweater. His pants lay in a heap next to her socks. His smile was uncontrollable as he collected his strewn articles of clothing, but he was unable to locate either of his shoes. Anna must have moved them at some point. He was almost embarrassed at his own delight, and laughed openly. It was sheer disbelief that made him laugh, for how, such a short time ago, could he have imagined such a perfect dilemma as being unable to locate his shoes in a woman’s quarters? He dressed slowly, knowing that Anna would take longer, and moved to the window to look over the station. Far to the left, almost out of view due to the curve of the ship, he could see the glass walkway of the airlock. It was far enough away that most would not be able to make it out, but he could see the quick figures of people coming and going. In fact, there were an inordinate number of people coming to the ship.

Ah. The banquet….

If he was lucky, he would manage to get to engineering without too much trouble from the guests. He heard the bathroom door open and turned. Anna stood in the doorway, fully dressed now, and drew a hairbrush through her hair in long strokes. She smiled.

“You should go to sickbay.” Lore said. He looked down at her leg, regretfully, “That bruise should be healed.”

Anna cringed, “Absolutely not.”

He couldn’t help but smile, though somewhat bashfully, for certainly she was right. Dr. Crusher would be sure to ask probing questions.

Anna finished with the hairbrush and tossed it on the bed. She stopped in front of him and laid her hands on his chest in a soft, feeling motion. It was as if she was sampling the way he felt, or savoring it. She saw the pleasant amusement on his face and laughed, “I’m sorry. I’m just… happy.”
That struck him harder than she might have guessed. The growing indifference of the crew towards him was something to be thankful for, but could he have ever imagined that he would actually make someone happy? Lore shook off his own disbelief, for he was beginning to irritate himself with it. He smiled and whispered in a conspiratorial voice, “Do you know where my shoes are?”

Anna burst into a fit of laughter, and quickly reprimanded herself by covered her mouth. Perhaps the scenario struck her as much as him, “Oh, I, eh…I think I kicked them under the desk when…last night.”

“Thank you.” He said with playful, exaggerated politeness. He knelt down next to the desk and crawled a few feet under until Anna collapsed into another volley of laughs. “Why, Lt. Hall, what is so funny?”

She did not reply, for she could hardly breathe.

Lore recovered his shoes, which had indeed been kicked against the wall under the desk, and pulled them on. He stood and folded his hands in front of him in the most calm, professional manner, “Shall we go to engineering now?”

Anna stopped her laughter just long enough to analyze his even stance, bright face, and slightly raised brow. She had seen the entire thing before, and often. He sound just like Commander Data. She forced a frown, “Oh, that’s not funny.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.” He replied. He was doing a good job keeping his amusement suppressed, but he was sure he couldn’t keep it up for much longer.

Anna tilted her head and grinned, “I think you mean ‘I am’, Commander.”

“You win.” He shrugged and took her hand, “We should go before LaForge starts calling.”

Lore hesitated just as they reached the door, not sure if he should leave at the same time with her, but Anna made up his mind for him. She took his hand and pulled him boldly into the corridor.

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It appeared that engineering had been placed on a skeleton crew, for Lore had only spotted five people come and go in the last hour, something quite unusual for engineering. He knew Starbase Seventy-Four offered some much needed leg room and leave to the crew, although he couldn’t understand why the humans would need more room, considering that they residing on a twenty-hour deck ship nearly a third of a mile in length. Still, they were gone.

“Where is everyone?” Lore asked Geordie and he returned to the side of the dilithium chamber. The entire warp chamber assembly was dismantled, the precious mound of dilithium crystals resting on a platform on the diagnostics table.

Geordie glanced over his shoulder at the crystals, something he did nearly every two or three minutes, and only just managed to give Lore a curious look. Lore rarely cared about what other people were doing. “When I do anything with the dilithium chamber, I want as few people in engineering as possible.” Geordie replied, “Besides, security protocols have been dropped, so I let the teams get some R and R.”
Lore narrowed his eyes quickly, and glanced at Anna. “They dropped the security protocols?”

“Well, yeah, since we don’t need to be on alert and….Ah,” Geordie sighed, “Data didn’t talk to you, did he?”

“Talk to me about what?” Lore pressed.

Geordie picked up a tricorder and tapped his fingers on it, “We got a message a few hours ago from a science outpost about three light years from here. Reed’s ship was destroyed.”

Lore stood instantly, for he had been kneeling next to the open floor panel where Anna worked. His eyes were wide, “How?”

“Apparently they attacked a Klingon freighter, probably trying to strip it like they did to the others, and the Klingons put up more of a fight than Reed counted on.”

Lore continued to stare at him, for he understood perfectly what he had heard, and yet would not allow himself the luxury of so easily accepting it. He looked at Anna, who appeared just as cautious.

“Did they analyze the wreckage for Vulcan DNA?” Anna asked.

Geordie shook his head, “From what we can tell, Reed had a hell of a lot of industrial grade mielocite in his cargo hold. There was barely anything left to scan after the Klingons got the better of him.” He looked from Lore’s face to Anna and saw the unease. He continued, “I’ve seen the scans and viewscreen imagery from the Klingon freighter. It was definitely Reed’s ship, and you can clearly hear him ordering the Klingons to hand over their cargo.”

“I want to see everything.” Lore insisted as he stepped away from the work area, “The scans and a full outlay for the Klingon freighter—.”

“Whoa.” Geordie raised his hands in a calming fashion, “Everything’s in the ship’s database, but we’re doing this now. I hate using the mag-lift for this sort of thing—you never know what could go wrong—so I need you to carry the crystal pack into the chamber.”

Lore scoffed, “Get Data to do your heavy lifting. Doesn’t he usually do it anyway?”

Geordie frowned irritably, for after so many months he had yet to grow accustomed to Lore’s snide insinuations that Data was some kind of Starfleet servant. He wondered if Lore actually believed it, or if he said such things just to irritate. It was probably the latter. “Yes, he does, and without nearly as much whining as you, but Data is busy at the moment.”

“Ah!” Lore laughed openly, “Don’t tell me he’s in ten forward with the diplomats. What is he doing, bending steel rods for their entertainment?”

“All right, that’s it! I have had enough of your anti-human—”

“Anti-human?” Lore repeated, suddenly alarmed.

“That’s right!” Geordie continued, “Data is not some indentured puppet like you make him out to be. He can leave whenever—”

“LaForge!” Lore raised his hands quickly, and his entire expression had changed. He was no longer laughing, and the lines on his forehead conveyed a genuine concern, “I wasn’t being serious.”
Geordie sighed heavily, no doubt releasing the words that had been ready to pour out against Lore, but he did not look much more pleased. He frowned at Lore again, “Just—Just help us finish this, and I’ll see you have access to all the information from the science outpost.” He hesitated as if he would say more, but merely scoffed and turned away into the control room.

“Hey.” Anna said softly and touched his hand. He looked down at and she was pursing her lips thoughtfully, “Why do you do that? You know it bothers them.”

“They don’t understand.” Lore said simply, “Which I find ironic, considering that humans are supposed to be my model for a sense of humor.”

“Oh, you mean they don’t understand that you were joking?” Anna ventured ironically, “You weren’t always joking, so it stands to reason they wouldn’t notice the sudden shift. Do you want me to download the outpost transmission to a pad? I know you can do two things at once.”

Lore smiled at the subtle comment, “Yes, I can.”

“Are you sure?” Anna pressed sarcastically, “After all, watching you perform two separate, highly cognitive tasks at the same time could be termed as ‘entertainment’.”

Lore shot her a quick, impressed look. “touche.”

“Of course not nearly as entertaining as bending steel.” Anna continued lightly, “Maybe later you could—”

Lore pressed his fingers over her lips quickly, and just as quickly moved them to kiss her. It was only after his lips touched hers that he realized how perfectly reckless he was being, and pulled back. There was no one else in the room. Geordie was still in the control room. It was safe. “I’m sorry.” He said at once, “That was stupid.”

“Yes it was.” Anna said. “But worth it.”

He smiled, but his thoughts quickly jumped backward. He knelt next to the panel again and set back to his task, but his eyes still drifted toward the far computer console. He was indecisive about waiting to verify the destruction of Reed’s ship, but Geordie was examining him now that he came out of the control room, and he did not wish to look torn. He picked up a hyperspanner and continued his work on the liner seals. He was thorough, as always, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He played over in his mind the sound of Reed’s voice, shouting at him that first day in Ten Forward. Murderer! You killed my wife! Lore closed his eyes and let hands hover for only a second. He did not feel sorry for Narok Reed’s death. He could not, not after what he had done to Anna and what he had threatened to do beyond that, but there was something else. The image of Lydia Reed, struggling in the hand of a Borg until the life drained out of her, struck him again for the first time in months. He was not sorry Reed was gone, but a part of him was sorry that the man never got his vengeance.

Lore scoffed suddenly. It hardly made sense to feel badly about that.

“What’s wrong?” Anna whispered. She was examining him closely, for he had stopped his work and stared at the deck without seeing it.

Lore pulled himself out of his thoughts and continued with the seals. “It’s nothing.”

After a few minutes the sound of happy voices drifted into the room along with the night-shift skeleton crew. Blake, Briggs, Larson, and Varek entered the room. Varek, of course, was not laughing with the others.
“I fail to see the humor in the scenario you described.” Varek stated matter-of-factly, “A misinterpretation of Bajoran custom is hardly worthy of comic interpretation.”

“Oh, you don’t get it, Varek!” Blake insisted as he shook his head and laughed, “He thought it was a cooking fire! He threw a piece of meat in there!”

Briggs and Larson laughed again.

“What are you talking about?” Geordie asked as he passed the control table. He was congenial, as always, but kept a close position to the precious dilithium crystals on the table. Accidents always happened.

“You should have been there, Sir!” Briggs shook his head like an amused parent, “You know the Bajorans are having their renewal festival, and those Bateret leaves are burning all over the station. Well, a member of the Klingon delegation thought it was outdoor cooking, and tossed a side of raw meat into one of the ceremonial burning bowls!”

“You haven’t seen anything until you’ve seen a Bajoran cleric beat a Klingon over the head with a bundle of Bateret vines!” Larson chimed in. His laughter was nearly as heavy and broad as Blake’s, so it struck the wall just as hard when he suddenly spotted Lore. His laughed died like a nasty cough.

“Sounds like I need to find some time to visit the station.” Geordie said, rather disinterested. There were few operations that put Geordie LaForge in an unamused mood, and dilithium chamber work was among them. “You guys are early, if you want to catch up on the logs before the meeting.”

“Great.” Blake nodded, gaining a little more decorum with each second, though his smile was still wide. He looked over to Larson, ready to mention something about the logs, but stopped. Larson’s amusement had completely drained away, and his eyes looked suddenly strained and tired.

Lore noticed it too, but hardly cared enough to think of the cause. Humans were full of self-destructive acts that left them tired, hungry, cold, or any of the other litany of their maladies. He looked at Anna again, who was leaning over a section of the liner and examining the seal she had just made. A touch of guilt made him frown. Perhaps he was too hard on the whole of humans….

“Hall?” Came a sudden, belted voice. Anna and Lore looked up, and both were surprised to see Larson standing a few yards from them. He was shifting his eyes over everything but their faces, it seemed, and his fingers slid repeatedly over the handle of his tool kit. “Did you hear about Carlson?” He continued, mechanically, “A little girl, more than three kilos.”

“No, I hadn’t heard anything yet.” Anna said politely.

Lore could tell that Anna was trying to look at Larson as much as possible, to do the polite thing, but the awkwardness of the situation was too much even for her. He narrowed his eyes at the man. Surely, Larson must have gotten the hint by now! He wished he could say something in response, something to force Larson’s attention to him, but he could think of nothing less than brutal.

“I, eh, I saw him and the baby when I was in sickbay. The baby is half Bajoran, you know, so the nose ridge is kind of subdued. She just looks like a human with a big nose.” He laughed a little at his own comment, but it was a strange, forced sound.
Lore grumbled and stubbornly continued his work. He wondered how harsh the penalty would be if he punched Larson just one more time….

“Okay, well, they’re doing the tradition Bajoran Christening—or baptism, or something—at nineteen hundred. Everyone’s invited.” Larson shifted his tool kit to his other hand and wiped his free palm on his uniform.

“Yeah, sure.” Anna nodded. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Okay, we’ll see you there.” He shifted his weight and, with a very purposely motion, turned toward Lore, “We’ll see you there, too, Lore. Bye.”

Lore shot an incredulous look, but Larson had already escaped into the control room. The object of his sarcasm being gone, he turned his shock to Anna, “Did he just invite me to a party?”

Anna clenched her lips together and ducked close to the chamber lining. She whispered, “I think he did.”

“Why?”

Anna shrugged, “I can only think of one reason. He wants to make up.”

Lore scoffed loudly.

“I didn’t say he likes you.” Anna added quickly. She laughed at the idea too, “I mean, he’s probably tired of walking on egg shells. It’s exhausting.”

“So what would be the point in inviting me a social gathering?” He still did not see the correlation.

Anna smiled and almost seemed to bury her face in the tool kit before her. “Lore, he’s trying to get you to the point where he doesn’t think you’ll attack him anymore. He’s surrendering.”

Lore gave the control room a fierce glare, as if Larson could see it right through the bulked. “That’s ridiculous. Why doesn’t he just tell me that he has no intention of bothering you anymore?”

“Oh, well,” She rolled her eyes, “You of all people should know that outright emotional honesty is not everyone’s first choice.”

“Are you making fun of me, Lt. Hall?”

“Yes.” She replied, for she knew that when he called her by her professional title that he was being particularly playful.

“Fine. What am I supposed to do at this Bajoran—?”

“Data to Lore. Please report to Ten Forward.”

Both Anna and Lore looked up in confusion. The banquet was going on in Ten Forward. Lore rose and took a few steps to the control table. He pressed the comm. “I’m busy, Data, and for what possible reason could you want—?”

“It is an urgent matter regarding Narok Reed’s vessel. Please come to Ten Forward now.”

Lore sighed and considered telling Data that LaForge had already shared the good news with him, but he was still in the mood to verify the information and this was as perfect an opportunity as
any. He tapped the comm again, “Fine. I’ll be right there.”

Anna stood and stretched her legs, “Are you ditching class, then?”

Lore raised a confused eyebrow, “Ditching?”

“Never mind.” She smiled, “Have fun with the diplomats.”

He was about to risk another kiss, or at least brush the hair from her face, but Larson quickly appeared from the control room and walked toward the dilithium chamber. “I have all the dilithium qualification, so I can replace you here.”

Lore had a nasty reply ready, but Anna squeezed his hand, “I’ll see you later.”

He squeezed her hand once and turned toward the exit. As soon he left the room, Anna felt an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach.
What was he thinking?

Lore stood outside the doors to Ten Forward and watched the party through the glass. It was hardly what one could call a party, as it mostly consisted of a dozen or so small groups congregating here and there, discussing topics that none of the participants seemed to really care for. The music playing was some horrible series of bells played in an atonal arrangement, and Lore recognized it as Betazoid ceremonial chimes. He kept his expression blank as he entered the room. Data stood with Captain Picard and Commander Riker, both of whom looked as if they were going to fall asleep. Their eyes were very awake, though, as soon as they spotted Lore.

“What is it?” Lore said as he stopped in front of the trio. Picard and Riker gave subtle, angry looks, while Data merely tilted his head in some confusion.

“What is…what?” Data replied.

Oh, please….Lore rolled his eyes irritably. If this was Data’s idea of finally forming a sense of humor, he was not in the mood. “If you have information about Reed’s ship, just give it to me and I’ll go.”

Picard and Riker looked at Data, almost accusingly, but Data shook his head, “All the information with regards to Reed’s vessel in the ship’s data base. You could have accessed it from engineering.”

“Is this some kind of joke?” Lore looked at each of them in turn and began to feel the hot embarrassment of one being messed with. “You told me to come here!”

At this sudden declaration, Data frowned and narrowed his eyes only slightly, as if he were trying to figure out Lore’s purpose. Then, he said rather plainly, “Lore, I did not call you.”

There was something so perfectly solid in Data’s tone, and his expression so even, that Lore was sure he was telling the truth. A heavy unease settled on him. He did not have instincts, in the traditional sense, and he certainly did not have gut reactions, but he did have an imagination. He darted past the three of them suddenly, grabbing the edge of the bar as he went around it. Guinan stood there with an open bottle in her hand. She was staring at him.

“Something is wrong.” She said.

Lore pressed the comm on the wall, “Lore to engineering.”

Nothing.

“Lore to Lt. Hall. Respond!”

Nothing.
Picard tapped his combadge, “Picard to bridge. Is there anything wrong with the comm system in engineering?”

“No, Sir, not that I can—” The voice broke off on a jagged note of static.

“Picard to bridge.” Picard said again. His demeanor was becoming serious now, “Picard to security. What the hell is going on?” He tapped his badge a few more times, but it no longer issued a sound.

Riker discarded his empty glass on the top of the bar and looked up, “Computer, is there a malfunction in the comm system?”

There was a long pause, as if the computer too would not respond, but eventually the familiar female voice replied, “Inquiries are limited to qualified personnel. Access denied.”

No! Lore dashed from behind the bar and toward the exit, pushing dumbfounded bystanders out of his way. His imagination—Hell! His instincts!—told him what it was, who it was, despite everything telling him that it wasn’t possible. He reached out his hand, ready to shove open the doors that he knew would not open fast enough, but his fingers were tossed back at him with such force that he stumbled. He starred in horror at the blue sparkle of a force field. He pressed forward again, determined, but once more was denied by a violent flash of energy.

“Lore, what is this!” Picard demanded. He moved through the crowd, which had now drawn to the edges of the room in confusion. “The computer isn’t recognizing any clearances!”

“He’s caging me in.” Lore muttered. He appears to be talking to himself, for he was not yet certain enough to speak to anyone else. He pushed past Picard and towards the exit at the other side of the room, but there too he was stopped by the force-field. He turned savagely toward the three men, his expression enraged and accusing, “Did they find Vulcan DNA in the wreckage? Did they!”

“The radiation from Reed’s cargo made a precise scan impossible.” Data said, “They detected organic matter, but could not analyze it further.”

“Ah, how convenient!” Lore ground his teeth like a stone mill and surveyed every inch of the room. There was a way. There was always a way out. He came to Data’s side quickly, “It was your voice over the comm, Data, there’s no mistaking that. He had access to the ship’s computer.”

“Wait just a minute!” Riker raised his hands, for many of the guests had begun to talk excitedly towards panic. “The walls we put around the computer access codes were upgraded to the highest level. There’s no way he could have hacked through them.”

Lore had already considered that. He was still close enough to his former self to know precisely how he would have done it. He shot Riker a nasty look, “You’re right. He would have at least needed a level three clearance code before he could destroy the rest of the access list. When this is over, I suggest you search the ship to find out which one of your officers he’s already killed.”

“Diana!” A trembling voice called out suddenly, “Wha...What’s going on?”

Troi, who had been standing on the other side of the room, crossed to her mother. They spoke in telepathic silence, for Lwaxana Troi’s expression shifted as if she were listening to something. Then, she turned and starred at Lore wide-eyed, “They’re here to kill you!”

“Yeah, thanks.” Lore said dismissively. He turned back to Data, “I have to get out of here.”
“We all have to get out of here!” The Denobulan ambassador cried out, “What is this about? Picard? What does she mean someone is coming to kill him?”

Lore turned away from the panicking throng and looked seriously at Picard and Data, “You know he’ll kill everyone if he has to. I have to get away from the ship.”

Picard nodded, “We’ll have to work fast. There’s an access hatch behind the bar. If there’s already a force field there, we can work to overload the emitter—”

“Oh!” A frightened cry rose up from the crowd and a great many of them pressed away from the far doors. The flickering sound of disrupted energy made their cries sound almost mechanical. Lore looked up, and once the last person had darted to the side of the room, he had a clear line to look Narok Reed directly in the eyes.

He stood on the other side of the force field, one hand held casually behind his back. With the other, he waved his fingers a few inches from the field, just close enough to make it spark with anticipation. “Hello, Lore.”

He said nothing in reply.

“Don’t be upset.” Reed continued. His eyes had a restrained excitement behind them, like violent fish behind a glass wall. His breathing was heavy, but he crushed his chest close with his own arm. “I too have kept company with people too incompetent to maintain adequate security. No offence, Captain.”

“You’ll never make it out of space dock.” Picard said in his usual stern calm, “You know that.”

Reed hardly seemed to notice the Captain, and kept his eyes firmly fixed on Lore. He stared at him for far too long, as if he were trying to make certain of something, and having come to some conclusion he smiled briefly.

Lore felt his hands clench in an automatic spasm, and calculated in half a second the endless list of options that Reed had at his disposal. Perhaps he would transport him into space and destroy him with the Enterprise weapons, or perhaps he would not rematerialize at all. Reed could simply scatter his atoms across the sector, a quick and pathetic end, but Lore doubted it. It was far more likely that the hand behind Reed’s back held a disruptor.

“Well?” Lore said finally. He did not want to die, but he was not going to beg, and he was not going to be shot in the back in a futile attempt to escape. What he had said to Data was true, and history supported his claim. Reed would stop at nothing and no one to get his revenge. Lore stepped forward, “If you had some melodramatic speech planned, save it.”

Reed’s smile faltered and his eyes grew hard, “No, Lore, I have very little to say to you. I just thought I should say hello before I left. I wouldn’t want to be rude.” He pulled his hand from behind his back to reveal a data pad, which he looked over with all the casual air of a man reading the news bulletins.

Lore betrayed his confusion with a sharp look. Perhaps the man had gone mad, which wasn’t a far stretch considering. Still, Lore could not imagine that Reed would kill him covertly or by some sort of foolish trickery, for revenge did not work that way. Revenge is meant to be personal. “What are you doing?” He belted suddenly, for Reed had turned as if to leave.

“I have business to attend to. Sorry I can’t stay.” He looked around the room slowly, as if he were checking it for something, then the smile he had initially shown returned, mixed with the
hard ice of his eyes, “If I were you, I wouldn’t bother trying to disrupt these force-fields. You won’t have nearly enough time before I’m gone.”

Once more Reed turned to leave, and this time Lore darted at the force-field with all the mindless intensity that hatred brings. He slammed his fist into the field in a rage, causing the power to arc badly enough that his vision, for a moment, was disrupted in a haze of crackling energy. He refused to be played with! If Narok Reed was going to kill him, he was going to do it personally, and without harming anyone else.

“What’s the matter, Narok?” Lore sneered, now barely feet away from the man, “Are you afraid you won’t be able to kill me before I get to you?”

“Kill you!” Reed spun around. What icy demeanor he had been working on was cracking, “What revenge is that! Death for a machine? Death for someone who can’t feel pain? No, that’s not revenge, Lore—” He broke off and clenched his jaw in purposeful restraint. The ice was reforming, forcefully, but no one was fooled anymore. He moved very close to the force-field now, so close that should Lore decide to strike with all his strength he could cause him serious harm, but still Reed stood close enough that his breath made the field flicker, “But I do know someone who can feel pain. You do to.”

A sudden gasp from the back of the room, and Lwaxana Troi stood with her hand over her mouth. She stared at Narok Reed the way one stares at a shuttle accident.

Lore darted his eyes back to Reed, “What are you s—”

“These hands….” Reed laughed as he lifted his hands and examined them, “They aren’t nearly as strong as a Borg’s, but I guess they’ll have to do.”

Lore’s vision seemed to crack again, but he had not touched the force-field. He backed away several steps as an abject horror reached into his chest and produced a pain nothing like he had ever felt. His legs became leaden. His breath was paralyzed.

“Goodbye, Lore. I think after this I won’t have any reason to see you again.” Reed slipped his data pad into his jacket and turned away from the room.

No….Deep in the back of Lore’s mind he heard something, a voice he had not heard in months and which he was sure he had left behind forever. It laughed and scoffed and muttered his name.

“He’s going to kill her, Lore.” His old voice assured him, “And it’s going to be entirely your fault.”

“No!” Lore barged into the force-field with all his strength, his fists raging against its impenetrable wall, until Data had to pull him back for his own good.

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“That’s odd. My hyperspanner didn’t recharge.” Blake said. He turned the tool over in his hands and headed back toward the dilithium chamber. “You think there’s something wrong with the power system in this console?”

Larson did not look up.
“Hey. Hello.”

Larson turned his head irritably, “You probably just didn’t put it on the pad correctly.”

Blake frowned, “No, I set it right in the middle there. I’ll set up a diagnostic to see if—”

“No!” Larson said sharply, “I mean… just get another one from the locker. We need to finish this.” He shook his head and turned back to the chamber liner, which was still sitting on the repair pedestal. His attention, however, was not on the work, and he looked around the room sharply. “Where is Hal?”

“She went to check a power fluctuation in one of the backup field generators for the crystal chamber. She tried to do a test on it, but the computer said it wasn’t responding.”

Larson turned back to the chamber liner. He hesitated for a moment before he stood and tossed his tricorder into the tool kit, “I think I’ll go see if she needs a hand.”

Blake frowned, but had the tact at least to not roll his eyes. “Come on, Man. You have to know by now that her and Lore—”

“Just do your job, Ensign.” Larson said through clenched teeth. “I’m not worried about Lore anymore.” He moved across the bay and into the aft junction room, out of sight.

“You should be….” Blake sighed and walked back toward the control table. He opened another tool kit, but before he removed another hyperspanner he heard the unmistakable energy whirl of a transporter beam. He spun around, but a pale hand struck him across the face before he even saw the fierce Bajoran woman now standing there. He fell back against the control table and pressed his hand to his combadge, “Intruder alert in engineering! Security!”

Buel Kala gripped her disruptor with both hands, “Shut up, Starfleet! No one can hear you. Conner! Where the hell is he? Let’s get this over with!”

“Calm down, Buel.” Reed said and he walked into the room.

Blake moved to lift himself from the ground, but Buel’s renewed aim kept him still. At the entrance to the control room, Geordie and Briggs stood still, their hands raise. Connor stood behind them with a phaser rifle aimed. Reed walked smoothly across the room, his demeanor showing no sign of worry. Blake starred at him and was unable to ignore the man’s frightening appearance. His hair was greasy and tossled like a bed of wet grass, and his eyes were surrounded by blue sunken shadows. Reed stopped before Geordie and Briggs, but only looked at Geordie. “You’re going to help with me with something, Commander.”

“Like hell.” Geordie said. He held his head up defiantly, “If you think the Captain will trade Lore for us, you’re out of your mind. He won’t negotiate with a terrorist.”

“Terrorist?” Reed smiled as if he found the insult cute. Reaching into his jacket, he removed the data pad he had there. He dropped it on the deck at Geordie’s feet. “You will help me now, Commander, or I will do what I have to do.”

Geordie looked down at the pad and saw an open personnel report. His lips parted for a moment, but he soon covered it with renewed defiance, “You’re never going to get away with this.”

Reed placed his boot on the pad and ground it into the floor, “I don’t plan to.”
“Lore! Stop! You cannot disable the power supply from this side of the bulked.” Data grabbed Lore’s shoulder, but his brother shook him off furiously and punched his fist against the wall panel with renewed vigor. The bioplast sheeting on his knuckles was beginning to sheer away.

“Get away from me!” Lore cried. He pulled at the guts of the wall panel and snatched them out like a collection of weeds, but the field did not even flicker. It was no surprise, and yet still infuriating. He knew Data was right; he was wasting his time. He finally stood back from the wall and pressed his hands to the side of his head, “He’s going to kill her!”

“Lore, we will not discover a solution if you panic.” Data said. It was odd that Data would try to sound emotionless and calm, since he had spent the majority of his life seeking the opposite, but he did now. “The removal of the access codes from the ship’s computer would have necessitated an erasure of the personnel IDs. He will not be able to use the ship’s computer to locate Lt. Hall.”

“You know how Reed’s wife died.” Lore said suddenly. He came close to Data, as if he was going to whisper, but his voice was still just as high, “You know that’s what he’s going to do to her—” He stopped. With the quick epiphany that sometimes comes with panic, Lore saw a way out and took it. He shoved past Data and into the stunned crowd, which parted like a sea at his advance. He grabbed the edge of the table there and flipped it over with a single hand, sending it’s messy contents onto the floor.

“He’s lost his damn mind!” Riker shouted, “Data!”

Lore fell to his knees and slammed his fist down. The deck-plate buckled in, allowing him to get hold of the thin red carpet and shred it away from floor. With fists like pick-axes, he punched through the deck-plate until it’s fasteners gave way and he tossed it across the deck. The busy bowels of the ship, power couplings and communications nodes, filled the space under the floor. Like a man hacking at underbrush, Lore reached his hands into the space and began to tear it to pieces.

Data moved forward, ready to stop his brother’s madness, when he realized what Lore was doing. He knelt next to the jagged hole and began to help him tear through the floor.

“What are you doing!” Picard demanded.

“Captain,” Data said as he worked, “The force-fields in this section do not function between decks. We may be able to escape through the floor.”

“This doesn’t make sense.” Riker said, “Why didn’t he just walk in here with a disruptor and kill Lore if that’s what he wanted?”

“It’s not what he wants!” Lore cried. His tone was desperate and cracking. Any concern for his demeanor was gone.

Data turned to Riker and the Captain, “Sir, Reed is not here for Lore. He is after Lt. Hall.”

There was a shared surprise between the men, but no one expressed it with anything more than a look.

Picard closed his eyes calmly, “Understood. We may not have much time.”
It took barely a minute for Data and Lore to gut the space under the deck, but as Lore reached thoughtlessly for the final largest obstruction, Data grabbed his arm, “That is a primary coolant distributer.”

“I have to get through!”

“You will kill everyone in this room.”

Lore ground his teeth and looked away. He was desperate, broken, and he didn’t give a damn about anyone in that room! But, he knew that wasn’t true, and even if Data did not present a barrier, he knew he would not condemn those souls to a painful death by breaking the coolant line. He fell against the bulked behind him and covered his face with his hands. He saw her as he did that day in the ship’s gymnasium, so determined and yet unable to even maintain a grip on a holographic attacker. She could not fight back. It was likely she was already dead.

“I can fit through there.”

Lore looked up and saw Diana Troi standing over the hole in the deck. She looked into the narrow space between the two coolant lines and swallowed hard, “It will be a tight fit, but if I’m lowered down straight I’m sure I can make it.”

“Diana….” Riker came forward. He expressed his opposition silently, but Troi understood. She smiled at him, “It will be fine. What am I supposed to do once I’m through?”

Lore scrambled to his feet. His gratitude was immeasurable, but that would have to wait. He braced his hands on either side of the hole and used his foot to press through the ceiling plate of the deck below. It gave way with a terrible crash, and the light from the corridor below came up through the floor. He turned and looked at Troi, “Use the access shaft in section two to come back to this deck and disable the force field from the other side. There’s a weapon’s locker near the access shaft.”

“And if it’s blocked?” She met Lore’s eye intently. She could feel all of his panic.

He cringed. It was very unlikely that Troi would reach Anna before Reed, and that was if Anna was still in engineering. Still, there were few other options, “Then take a weapon to engineering and try to warn Anna. If she hides or manages to get off the ship, it’s unlikely he will find her.”

Troi nodded and stepped down onto one of the coolant lines. Data and Lore took her arms, ready to lower her through the narrow space between the lines. Slowly, her legs and hips and made it through the tight space, and she blew all the air out of her lungs for the final push. Data released her one hand, allowing her shoulder to drop through, and Lore lowered her the rest of the way. When she was about three feet from the deck below, Lore whispered to her, “Troi?”

She looked up, strained, “Yes?”

“Please. I…I need her.”

“I know.” She gave him a reassuring nod, “Let me go.”

Troi dropped to the deck below, looked both ways, and ran toward the access shaft.

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Anna stepped back from the power relay and sighed irritably. She had always been remarkably patient with people, but for some reason machines had always had the ability to frustrate her. Even when she was a child she would play endlessly with the most insufferable children, but throw a tantrum if the food replicator stopped working. She closed her eyes and smiled at the ridiculous comparison. Lore was a machine, and he certainly did not.

“Do you need some help?”

Anna looked over her shoulder, startled, for she had been so lost in her own thoughts that she might have spoken to herself, “Oh! John…hi.” She turned back toward the power relay and immediately knelt down in front of the panel that she had just closed. She had never been one to be openly hostile, but if she appeared to be working maybe he would go away.

“Blake said the computer was giving you some trouble doing a diagnostic.” Larson continued. He hovered in the doorway and looked back into the corridor behind him, “Did you try resetting it’s connection?”

“Well…no, not yet.” She admitted ruefully. If she had tried that first, he would have no reason to stay. “I’ll try that now.”

Larson laughed, but it sounded forced, “If you disconnect one port without the other, the computer will put up a red flag for repair. If I help you disconnect the second port at the same time, it will save LaForge some work in the maintenance log.”

Anna smiled and nodded, and turned back to the power relay, “Okay.” As she faced the relay and tried to make herself look far busier than she was, she could almost feel the cold wind of Larson staring at her back. She knew, of course, that it was entirely her own doing. She was making herself feel uncomfortably, for surely she had been right when she told Lore that Larson was just trying to get past everything. She nodded to convince herself, and turned toward him, “Did you spend a lot of time on the station?” She asked cordially.

“Uh…not too much, just a drink or two at a bar, and I watched the Bajoran festival.” He muttered as he opened a wall panel near the door.

“Alcohol or synthohol?” Anna said with a little laugh. She did not even consider the idea that her forced cordiality might be leading him on or giving him room to hope. Anna’s over-the-top modesty rarely allowed her to think that way.

“Alcohol.” Larson admitted. He smiled too and laughed at it, “But it’s not nearly as bad as everyone says. I felt fine.” He reached up and rubbed his sleeve across his eyes briefly. His head still hurt.

“I’ve never tried it.” She said.

“Probably because you always looked too young.” Larson joked, “I bet when you were thirty they still refusing to serve you.”

Anna smiled at the compliment, for it was one that she had heard so many times from Larson. She placed her hand on the isolinear connection in front of her, “I’m ready.”

“Okay, on three. One, two…three!”

They both pulled their respective isolinear connection away from its port and watched as the
The power system should have compensated within a few seconds, but the room remained in stubborn darkness, lit only the few emergency lights in the corridor.

“That doesn’t make sense. This power relay isn’t part of the primary line, the computer should have compensated by now.” Anna stood and moved carefully so as not to step on her open tool case. “I'll go back to engineering and see if there's some kind of disruption.”

“We don’t have to drag all the way back there.” Larson said quickly, “It’s probably just a blown adapter.”

Anna looked back at the power relay, though it was too dark for her to see it anymore. She breathed deep. Blown adapters always had a smell of burning grease. “I don’t think so. It seems like the computer is simply not compensating.” She tapped her combadge, and because of the dark she did not notice Larson’s spastic objection, “Hall to Blake. Can you run a diagnostic on the section two power system?”

“I think security said something about running a comm test this afternoon.” Larson said immediately. “It might still be down.”

“Why wouldn’t they mention that at the maintenance meeting?” Anna said, exasperated. She found her tricorder on a nearby ledge and headed toward the door.

“Um…where are you going?” Larson chuckled awkwardly as he moved subtly toward the corridor.

“Back to engineering.” She replied shortly.

“Wait, wait.” Larson jumped in front of the exit, “You’re giving up too easily. If we just replace a few adapter nodes, I bet you that’ll fix it.”

Anna frowned and looked at his arm casually blocking her way, “Come on, John, I’m not going to start blindly pulling adapter nodes. Let’s just go back —.”

“Whoa! Look, just…just stay here a while.” He said again. His forced grin took a harder edge and he moved more solidly into the doorway. “The comm shouldn’t be down much longer.”

Anna backed a half-step away from him and looked into the corridor. Her stomach became heavy. “That’s enough, John. If you want to stay here, fine.” She pressed forward, ready to lift his arm out of her way if necessary, when he grabbed her arm suddenly. “John!”

“Why do you always have to be so difficult, huh?” He said angrily, “Why can’t you just give someone the benefit of the doubt!”

“Get out of my way!” Anna pulled her arm from his grip, “What is wrong with you?”

“What wrong with me!” He shot back. His expression became dark and sarcastic, and he still blocked the door, “I guess if Lore had asked you to stay here, you wouldn’t bat an eye. Isn’t that right? A mass murder with a holographic soul, and you ask what’s wrong with me!”

“Better him than you!” Anna screamed suddenly. The words flew out of her before she even thought about them, and for the first time in her life she did not regret the brutal honesty. She shoved forward with both hands out, but lacked the strength to push Larson out of her way. Still, he was not big enough to block the entire doorway, and she pressed herself through the small space under his arm. The doorframe, however, had a raised ledge on the bottom, and her foot caught it as she turned. She fell back into the corridor with arms out and nothing to grab hold of.
“You little bitch!” Larson shouted. His eyes were wide and the whites had gone red with fury, “A machine? You prefer a thing!”

Anna scrambled to gain her feet, but Larson grabbed the back of her uniform and violently pulled her down. She turned and swiped at him with her open hand. The sensation of her nails breaking his skin was almost sickening, and he groaned in pain. In a second, he had her wrists in his hands and pressed her back against the floor. She flailed her arms as much as she could, but his grip was too much. “Let go of me!” She screamed.

“Shut up!” Larson growled. He pulled both her arms over her head and twisted her wrist into the grip of his other hand, holding both of them. He hesitated for a moment and looked frantically through the dark, as if he was not sure of what he would do. Suddenly, he made a malicious grin. With his free hand, he searched for the waistband of her uniform.

Utter panic consumed her, and she flailed wildly. The humiliation of being so easily overpowered drove tears to her eyes as she futilely pulled against his grip. She felt the waistband of her uniform separate from the top, and Larson’s hand touched her bare skin.

“No!” She cried, “Bastard! He’ll kill you! I hope he kills you!”

Confident in the knowledge that they could not be heard, he did not even both to cover her mouth. He drew back onto his knees, ready to pull the bottom of her uniform free, when his weight moved away from her leg. Anna pulled back and kicked as hard as she could. Her first blow struck him in the lower stomach, knocking the wind out of him, but her second blow was more precise. He released a gut wrenching groan and fell to his side.

Anna twisted onto her knees and scrambled forward, tripping over Larson’s feet in her panic. She looked back at him only once, seeing that he was recovering to his feet, but she did not stop to look again. She ran down the dim corridor as fast as she could, her hands braced in front of her for the obstructions she could not see. Her heart was pounding so hard that the sides of her head ached and her ears rang. She knew what she should do, the right thing to do, but a flaring sense of revenge told her to ignore security and go straight to Lore. Never in her life had she felt so satisfied by the prospect of another person’s death! But, as she neared the door of the junction room, she swallowed and forced her breathing to slow.

She moved quickly through the door and squinted into the brighter lights of engineering. She came round the warp core and spotted Geordie, “Commander, I have to talk to you right away. I—” She halted as if at the edge of a precipice, while every ounce of air rushed from her lungs. Standing behind Geordie, with a phaser in his hand, was Narok Reed.

The man who had held a disruptor to the back of her head only days before tilted his head slightly and smiled, “Lieutenant Hall?”

She was frozen, and her eyes darted to each face before her. Reed stepped around Geordie and holstered his weapon with a satisfied sigh, “That’s what I thought.”

“No!” Anna leapt back, but she was not fast enough to outrun his reach. He grabbed her by the thick blanket of her hair and pulled her back against him.

“Would you care to go on a little trip with me, Miss Hall?”

“Anna!”

Reed spun around, swinging Anna with him, and faced the wide entrance. Diana Troi stood
“Let her go!” Troi demanded

“Buel!” Reed growled and threw Anna to the floor behind the control table. Shots fired as Buel and Connor took aim at the outnumber counselor. She threw herself back into the corridor for cover.

“Geordie!” Troi shouted over the melee, “You need to restore comms!”

Geordie, who appeared to be a forgotten ward as Buel and Connor fired phaser shots around the main entrance, scrambled into the back of the control room and hurriedly tried to bring up the comm system. Blake knelt next to the wall and eyed Connor with a malicious intent. As soon as Connor ducked to avoid one of Troi’s shots, he sprang at him. Connor turned, ready to strike with the butt of his rifle, but Blake was too close. They collided and both men rolled over the top of the control table in a desperate struggle over the rifle.

“Get ready!” Reed shouted. He stood and pulled Anna up with him. When she resisted with a violent blow to his chin, he dug his fingers into the curve of her neck. Anna’s eyes rolled back into her head under the assault of the Vulcan nerve pinch. She collapsed like an accordion, but Reed held her around the waist. “Now!”

Buel fired two more shots before she knelt down behind the control table. She pressed something on the side of her rifle, and in a blur of yellow light they vanished. The firing ceased, and the room fell silent. Not even the hum of the ship’s engines covered the vacant space where Anna had stood.

Troi ran into the room, her phaser still raised and looked desperately at Blake and Geordie. Geordie dropped his hands in angry defeat. “Comms are up.”

Troi tapped her badge once, “Troi to Ten Forward. Reed escaped…with Lt. Hall.” She could sense Lore’s despair from twelve decks away.
Chaper 47

“I can’t wait.”

Lore was remarkably silent. It was making everyone nervous.

“It was a Lurian Freighter, Captain. There’s more than a dozen in here every week.” The Station manager, Mr. Shaw, folded his hands in front of him and looked at the floor. “From what we can tell, the human male assumed the identity of a silks trader.”

“And just how does a human pass himself off as a Lurian silk trader?” Riker demanded as he leaned both his hands on the control table. Despite his intensity, he shot a quick glance in Lore’s direction.

“I’m truly sorry about this, Captain.” Mr. Shaw said, “This station is…well, one of the purposes of an open port is that the authorities don’t ask many questions.”

Apparently.” Picard replied, “Have your security dispatches come up with any heading…?”

Lore had stopped listening. They were rehashing what everyone already knew. Reed was gone, and he would have made sure that no one was able to follow. Lore stood against the bulked, behind everyone else, and let his eyes scan the room in a methodical sweep. To those who shot worried glances in his direction, his expression appeared vacant and lifeless, and for good cause. His heart was broken.

“You killed her. You know it.”

Lore gasped silently and turned away, but the voice was not in front of him, nor beside him or behind. There was no getting away.

“Reed’s vessel was no longer attached to the docking ring when they made their escape.” Worf grumbled. Everyone could see the frustration on his slightly perspiring brow. It was his security that had been so painlessly breached, “If he had been docked, we could have secured his ship!”

Lore continued to stare around the room, but his attention was caught by a head of blonde hair moving quickly from the junction room to the control center. Larson carried a tool kit, which he stuffed into the supply locker with a downcast look. Lore turned to follow him with narrow, angry eyes. Why had he not been in engineering when Reed boarded?

“Looking to blame someone else?” The voice laughed, “You have only yourself to blame.”

Lore groaned and several turned to look at him.

“From what I can tell, Captain, Reed’s plan was incredibly precise.” LaForge said over the control table, “This algorithm he used to disable the command codes had a series of sequences that wouldn’t have lasted anymore than…ten minutes or so. He clearly had no plans to stay any longer than that.”

For some reason everyone was dancing around the undeniable truth, and their occasional
glances in Lore’s direction gave some hint as to why. Picard finally drew a deep breath, “I think it’s clear that Mr. Reed never had any intention of attacking Lore. He came here for Lt. Hall.”

Whatever outburst they expected from Lore did not come. He was too engrossed by Larson’s sly entry into the control room. He turned and grabbed Blake’s arm suddenly, and whispered to him, “Tell me exactly what happened? Where was Anna? Where was Larson?”

Blake swallowed hard, “She went to check out one of the backup field generators that wasn’t responding. A little later, Larson went to give her a hand.”

“How did Anna get back here? Why didn’t she stay in the service corridor?” Lore could hear the panic in his own voice and he knew he was being unfair. How could Blake possible know why Anna would go from one place to another?

Blake shook his head, but stopped suddenly. His expression looked almost sick, “Anna came running out of the junction room. I remember that, she looked…kind of panicked and called for Commander LaForge. That was when Reed grabbed her.”

Lore released Blake’s arm and drew back. None of the intruder alerts had sounded, and comms were down. How could Anna have known that Reed was aboard until she saw him? If she did not know, why was she running from the junction room? Lore stepped away from the bulked and stopped in front of the control room entrance. Larson was bent over a console in the back corner, his fingers moving furiously over the controls. Lore could hear his strained heartbeat from there, and could see on the side of his neck a row of bright red scratches.

“You!” Lore rushed forward and grabbed Larson by the back of the neck. Like a rag doll, he flung him across the room. Larson struck the chair just near the entrance and tumbled into the open space of the engineering bay. Raised voices sounded as everyone saw Lore emerge from the control room. Reaching Larson, he picked him up by the front of his uniform and slammed him down on the control table. The glass surface shattered under the impact, and Larson’s eyes rolled dangerous into the back of his head.

“Lore! Stop this!” Picard shouted, but Lore heard none of it. He did not even see them anymore. He only saw the arrogant, jealous face of the man who had betrayed them all. It must have been him. There was no one else. Lore raised his hand, ready to crush the very life out of Larson’s heart, when an overwhelming force struck him the chest and sent him back from the table. He crashed into the bulked, where Data held him fast.

“Do not resist!” Data shouted, “I will order security to fire on you, Lore.”

Lore pressed back, but saw Worf’s raised weapon trained on him. The Klingon would not have been stupid enough to leave the setting on stun. Still, he glared past Data’s shoulder at the broken and groaning Larson. “He helped Reed to break the computer access! He attacked Anna!”

“What? There’s no proof of that.” Riker said.

“What were you doing in the control room!” Lore shouted at Larson. “Answer me!” He shoved forward just enough to startle Larson into rolling off the control table. “You helped them murder her! For what? Because she wouldn’t have you!”

“They were supposed to take you!” Larson cried suddenly. His voice broke as he knelt on the floor. Blood was streaming from the gashes on his back, and his face was growing pale. “She wasn’t supposed to be part of it, they were just supposed to take you!”
Everyone stood silent, and Data lowered his hand from Lore’s chest.

“Captain!” Blake came rushing back out of the control room, “It was the comm system, Sir. I think he was trying to delete records.”

Picard stepped toward Larson, “This is treason, Lieutenant.”

“Treason?” Larson spat. Whatever professionalism or decorum he had was gone now, “You brought a murderer onto this ship and made us a target, and I’m guilty of treason? Kendrick would still be alive if it wasn’t for…for that thing!”

“Where did they take her!” Lore demanded.

“Are you deaf! I just told you that taking her wasn’t the plan. I would hardly know where she is then, would I?” Larson tried to regain his feet, and as soon as he did Worf took his arm in restraint.

“Escort Lt. Larson to sickbay, Commander.” Picard said through clenched teeth, “After Dr. Crusher sees him, escort him to the brig.”

Data kept his place in front of Lore as Worf and Larson made their way, slowly, out to the corridor. Lore’s rage was beginning to subside only because despair was drowning it. Finding the traitor was his last resort, his last hope of discovering where they had taken Anna, and even that had been a stretch. He had to, although his every self-interest raged against it, to accept that Anna was likely already dead.

“She’s dead.” Lore muttered suddenly. He leaned back against the bulked and looked as if he might slide down to the floor, “He’s killed her already!”

Data came forward and placed his hand on Lore’s shoulder. It was uncomfortable show of concern, for neither man would have imagined such a scenario too long ago. “You must not panic, Lore.”

“Why?” He sneered back. His self-control was breaking down, “You have no idea, no idea!” He did not mean to be cruel, he was just stating a fact. Data had never been in love. How could he possibly understand?

“No, wait. Wait just a minute.” LaForge came forward, “Why didn’t he just kill her here? He had the opportunity, the weapons. He went out of his way to get her off this ship.”

Lore stared at him, “What do you mean?”

LaForge addressed everyone, but looked at Captain Picard, “If he wanted to kill Hall, he could have just disrupted the environmental controls and killed everyone. We know he doesn’t have any qualms about that. Plus, he had plenty of opportunity to shoot her if that was his goal. He took her for a reason, Captain.”

“Even if that’s the case,” Riker said, “We’re having no luck following his warp trail. He masked it too well.”

Lore looked up sharply. Revenge was something that consumed his mind for too long to forget how it worked, how perfect certain scenarios and outcomes could make it. He knew what he would have done in Reed’s place, and the sudden knowledge made him crumble. “I know where he took her.” Lore said, “He’s taking her to Ohniaka Three.”

It was apparent from the look on Picard’s face that he understood perfectly. There wasn’t a soul
on board who did not know about Ohniaka III. Still, he could not entertain assumptions, “It’s nearly a twenty hour journey to the Ohniaka System. If we waste time on an inaccurate heading—.”

“It’s what I would have done.” Lore countered. His eyes were heavy and dark, despite his bright gold irises. “An eye for an eye; isn’t that what humans used to say?”

“Captain!” LaForge called. He stood near one of the aft consoles, “I just a report from station security. They locates a muted ion trail that matches a Lorian frighter, but it’s dispersed in several directions. It will take some time, but we should get an accurate heading after we calculate the decay rates.”

“Excellent. Commander, I want the engines operational before we get that heading.” Picard glanced at the disassembled dilithium chamber.

LaForge filled his chest and nodded, a motion he always took when a request on him was likely to fail. But, he was nothing if not an optimist. He turned to Blake, “I need you to get Carlson down here immediately, and start running every diagnostic you can think of on the runup systems. We need to know if the computer breach caused any lingering problems before we do a test run.”

Lore darted his eyes around the room as people scurried into action. It was action for no purpose. It would take hours to reassemble the chamber!

“Damn!” Geordie said as he turned over one of the chamber seal panels. It was scorched and disfigured by disruptor fire. “Blake, get down to the storage bay and retrieve some more distilet. We’re going to have to fabric a whole new liner!”

“I’ll go.” Lore said suddenly. He raised a hand in Blake’s direction, “You do the compute diagnostics.” He spoke quickly, perhaps too quickly, for as he headed for the exit Data was at his side.

“I will assist you.” Data said.

Lore said nothing in reply as he folded his hands in front of him and entered the turbo lift. Data called for the appropriate deck and the lift began to move.

“Lore.” Data said without turning. His voice was unusually low, “You were correct when you said that I have ‘no idea’, but we will do everything possible to retrieve Lt. Hall.”

The words alone were so basic, so professional, but Lore could hear the empathy in his voice. It only made what he did next that more difficult. Lore reached into his sleeve and removed the hyperspanner he had concealed there. “I know, Data. Thank you.” With the setting at its highest point, Lore pressed the spanner to the base of Data skull. No one but the two of them would have known that the primary cognitive switch was just two centimeters above the base of the neck, slightly to the left. Data gasped, but the sound died almost immediately as his body went stiff and he fell back. Lore caught him by the arms and lowered him to the deck.

“I’m sorry, Data, but I’m not going to let him kill her. I can’t wait.”

Lore stopped the lift on deck ten and walked calmly in the direction of the shuttle bay.
Chapter 48

“The same deep blue. I knew it.”

It was amazing how much she reminded him of her. It made little sense, of course, for Lydia Reed had really looked nothing like the red-haired Starfleet officer that lay before him. Lydia had been much taller, almost as tall as he, and she had always been rather proud of it. Sometimes, she would wear heeled shoes in her off duty hours, just to be a little taller than him. He never minded, for he was not so vain. Also, the hair.... Lydia had been blessed with naturally blonde hair, almost golden in the right kind of light. She had worn it pixie-short when they first met, but over the first years of their marriage it had grown to a beautiful wavy length. And her physique! It was not even close. His beloved Lydia had always been an athletic type, for she loved to run and swim, and her feminine curves had always been subtle, muted. This woman was like a cartoon drawing of the hour-glass figure. No. They were nothing alike.

Yet, hadn’t Lydia always slept on her stomach in the same manner, with her arm cradled under her chest just so? He was sure of it. Yes, he remembered that! And he was certain that this woman wore her uniform the same way, with the top of the turtleneck just barely unzipped for comfort. Lydia had always hated the restriction of those uniform turtlenecks....

Narok Reed bent over and pressed his face into his hands. His groan would have been audible had it not been for the relentless hum and banging of the Lurian engines. The room was dim, stifling with heat, and moist like the inside of a badly designed kitchen. Beads of moisture clung to the walls and dripped down one by one. Lurians, those enigmatic traders with skin like rock, preferred it this way. Their appearance was so formidable and alien that he had expected them to put up more of a fight when he took their vessel, but looks can be deceiving. They cowered under his disruptor and did not even beg.

A loud bang issued from the far wall, forcing Reed to look up finally. The engines were straining, but he did not care. They only needed to last a bit longer, and then he would hardly need them. His eyes fell on the woman again, whose still form was sprawled out on the hard bunk surface. Had she been placed that way, or had she made her own unconscious sleeping position? He was sure she must have moved. Buel and Connor would not have placed her in such a comfortable state.

Reed stood suddenly and pulled the stool from under him. He placed it closer to the bunk, much closer, and retook his seat. Yes, she did remind him of her! Her shape, her face, her hair were all so different, and yet her skin was just as flawless, like polished ivory. He had even removed her clothing just to make certain.

Anna lay with her face toward the wall, and the first thing she was conscious of was that her shoulder ached. It happened sometimes when she fell asleep with her arm under her pillow, and so for a few seconds she imagined she was in her bed in her quarters. She wondered what time it was and if she was late for her shift, but that lasted only a few moments. She lay perfectly still, hoping in her half conscious mind that she was dreaming about something.

Reed looked over her perfect skin again and almost smiled. Lydia had always been so vain about her skin, never letting herself get too much sun. The only other thing he could think of was
the eyes. What color eyes did this woman have? He could not remember, and reached forward to pull her eyelid back.

Anna twisted around in a violent start, slapping his hand away from her face. It took but a fraction of a second for her to realize that she was completely nude, and she scrambled back into the corner of the cot. There was no mattress, no sheet or pillow. She tried pathetically to cover herself with only her arms.

Reed watched this entire display as if he was viewing some animal behind a glass wall. He never flinched or moved back, but actually leaned forward as if to get a better look. “Ah….” He muttered as he leaned closer, “The same deep blue. I knew it.”

“Get away from me!” Anna screamed as she moved still closed to the wall. Her heart was beating so that she could hardly breathe. She kept her eyes locked on Reed’s still hands while at the same time trying to get some idea of where she was. Beyond the lamp that hung over them, the room was so dim that she could hardly make out the far wall. Shadows of piled equipment wiggled under flickering lights, and she could just make out the frame of a large door.

“There’s no need to be jumpy, Anna. It won’t help anything.” Reed said.

“Where am I!” She demanded. Her anger was beginning to rise beyond her initial shock, and she glared at him with the most suspicious contempt. She continued to hide herself behind her own arms.

“A Lurian freighter. I know. It’s hot and uncomfortable, but it can’t be helped.”

“Is that why you took my clothes!”

The corner of Reed’s mouth lifted in a dismissive smile, “No. Do you know why you’re here?”

Anna scoffed at him, for what could she say to such a ridiculous question. He had brought her there! Instead she demanded, “Where are you taking me?”

Reed rested his elbows on his knees and leaned forward. He had the condescending air of speaking to a child, “He loves you, Anna. That is why you’re here.”

Anna fumbled in silence and drew back. She looked away from him, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re a bad liar.” He scoffed, “But I would expect as much from an El’ Aurian. They speak so little, why should they be any good at lying —”

“I want my clothes!”

Reed blinked, surprised, “Amazing. You have her temper too.”

Anna stared at him with cautious horror. The man was insane, and she could see no way out. Instinctively, the back of her eyes grew painful and she could feel the frustrated tears welling up, but she refused to cry. Not in front of this monster! “Where…are you taking me?”

“Ohniaka Three.”

Anna gasped sharply. It was too fast for her to conceal.

“Ah….” Reed leaned back and glared at her, “You know it, then. Tell me, do you know how he
“killed my wife?”

Anna turned away from him, but she said the first words that came to her mind. Even she knew they were untrue, “He didn’t kill your wife. It was the Bor —”

Reed lurched forward with his hands out and slammed Anna’s back against the wall. His hand was fixed firmly around her neck. “It was him! Those Borg were his puppets, and he watched them murder every person on that outpost! You…you defend him!” His grip tightened, and Anna struggled with both hands against his grip, but his Vulcan strength was too much. She desperately reached for his eyes as she felt her face becoming bloated with blood.

“No!” Reed slammed her back a final time before he released his hold. He stood back, clenching his fists in an attempt to calm them. He couldn’t kill her yet. No, that wasn’t perfect enough.

Anna fell onto her side and struggled to fill her lungs in short, desperate gasps. The tears she had been holding broke loose and streamed down her reddened face. Determined to hold her last bit of dignity, she lifted her head and glared at him, unashamed.

The large bay doors across the room opened, and quick tapping steps moved into the room, “Reed, the engines can’t take much more. If we don’t slow…”

Anna turned away, but continued to watch from her peripheral vision. It was the Bajoran woman, Buel, and she was starring at Anna’s nude, shaken form. After a moment, Buel forced herself to look away.

“I don’t give a damn about the engines!” Reed howled. “Run them to the break, for all I care, just get us there!”

Buel shot another furtive glance at Anna and took a step back toward the door, “If we don’t find some way to extend the plasma mixture, we’re never going to get to Ohniaka Three. I…I don’t really understand this engine design —”

“Worthless!” Reed kicked the small stool across the room. It stopped halfway to the door, where it struck a glittering forcefield before being pushed back. “I’ll do it myself!”

He flew past Buel, who backed away like she was avoiding a swinging door. She moved to follow, but her feet objected, and she shuffled in place. Buel Kala had done some horrible things in her life, but her own twisted logic had always argued that there had been a purpose; latinum, information, trade routes, but this! She glanced at Anna, naked on the hard metal bunk, and felt sick to her stomach. She never thought she would be doing this.

Anna met Buel’s eyes for only a second, but there she saw some kind of hope. It was miniscule, but Anna looked up sharply, and when Buel moved to leave Anna stepped down from the bunk, “Please!”

Buel stopped at the door. Her head hung in front of her like a weight.

“Help me.” Anna pleaded. Her voice was calmer than she expected.

Buel’s chest heaved and she could feel her face growing hot. Sympathy was for the weak; wasn’t that what she had always told herself? She took another step forward, but halted again. Damnit all!

Anna crossed her arms over her chest and stepped back as Buel spun around suddenly. She flew her eyes over the room for merely a second, until she saw a shadowy pile of black and purple cloth
atop one of the metal cabinets. She scooped up the pile and approached the force-field. Pulling her weapon from her holster, she pointed it at Anna and managed to work the wall panel with her arms full. The force-field blinked out, and Buel tossed the pile onto the floor of the cell. Anna’s uniform and boots scattered across the deck.

“Just…just do what he says, okay!” Buel reinitialized the field and holstered her weapon.

“Why are you doing this?” Anna called behind her. Once again Buel stopped, “You have a weapon, you could do something—.”

“I can’t do anything, human!” Buel leaned her hand against the doorframe and looked into the corridor, “He resets the auto-destruct every hour, and he’s the only one who knows the codes. He has me, just like you. You…you might survive this. He’s just using you to lure your android.”

Anna coughed a bitter, angry laugh. “I think you know that isn’t true.”

“What do you want from me, Human?” Buel spat back, her expression at once embarrassed and angry. “Did you ever think that maybe you had this coming? That android of yours is a mass murderer, but don’t humans find it so easy to ignore things when they aren’t convenient! Just look the other way and keep playing with your holodecks and your food replicators and your shiny damn starships!” An image, one which Buel had not thought of in many years, appeared before her. She was at the Bajoran refugee camp where her grandparents settled after fleeing an occupied Bajor. A Starfleet ship had come and left some blankets, a few medical kits. They had said they would be back. They never returned.

Anna crossed her arms tighter and seethed. “How many people have you killed, pirate? How much of an argument did you make when Reed tried to murder nine hundred people aboard my ship?” Her words were beginning to shake, but anger gave her all the fortification she needed. She narrowed her eyes at the woman and saw only a collaborator. “Maybe you’ll deserve what happens to you when Lore comes to get me.”

Buel slammed her hand against the wall panel and left the room, the massive doors falling shut behind her.

Anna dressed and stood next to the bunk where she had lain. Despite the stifling heat of the room, she felt a debilitating chill run down her spine. For the first time in Anna Hall’s optimistic life, she did not feel that everything would be okay.
“He didn’t steal a shuttle”

“Could somebody please explain to me how we let this happen? Again?” Riker grumbled as he moved around the bio bed. His head was tilted more than usual, at it often was when he was frustrated.

Beverly Crusher said nothing. The angry musings about naiveté and stupidity had been coming in spurts and stops for the better part of two hours. She didn’t see the point in bemoaning it any more. Lore had incapacitated Data. He had escaped. There was little that complaining could do about it now.

“I’m just about finished.” Crusher announced as she leaned close to the open panel at the base of Data’s skull. She wished they had had the forethought to position Data in a chair or a standing module. As it was now, he lay on his stomach on a bio-bed, his face pressed into the cushions in a painfully harsh manner that no human would have been able to tolerate. She hated seeing him like this.

Geordie sat on a low stool on the other side of the bed, his eyes just about level with Data’s head. He worked meticulously in another open panel on Data’s temple. “Son of a bitch,” He muttered, “That hyper spanner could have fried half of Data’s memory filaments. Selfish, backstabbing….”

“The difference between incapacitating his motor functions and destroying his net connections was a thin line, Geordie. I don’t think it was a lucky break.” Crusher said slowly. She needed to keep her hands steady. “Lore clearly knew what he was doing.”

Geordie sighed, “I got to admit, Doc, you’re the last person I would expect to be giving him the benefit of the doubt.”

Crusher finished her last connection and stood back, “It wasn’t a defense. Quite the opposite.”

The sickbay doors opened, and a very stern looking Worf entered the room. He had a tricorder in his hand, and the poor thing looking like it had taken the brunt of the security chief’s bad day. “I have finished my interrogation, Commander. He does not appear to know where they took Lieutenant Hall.”

Riker shook his head, though he had already assumed as much, “Have you told the Captain?”

“I am submitted my report now.” Worf replied, “I can confidently report that Lt. Larson did not appear to know that Lt. Hall was the target.”

Riker frowned, “So not only is he a traitor, he’s a stupid one too. I’ll speak with the Captain, but I doubt he will see any reason to keep Mr. Larson on board. Get him ready for transport to station security. He can answer for himself in front of the sector JAG.”

“I think I have it.” Geordie announced. He rose from his stool and gingerly closed the panel on Data’s temple. A moment later, Data’s body twitched, then his hand moved up and pressed into the bed, and he lifted his face out of the pillow. He blinked several times and looked side to side. In
only a few second his blank expressions went from confused to bitterly aware.

“Lore attacked me?” Data asked.

“Yes.” Said Crusher.

“And he escaped?”

“Yes.” Geordie sighed.

“And we were not able to follow him?”

“Afraid not.” Riker grumbled.

“I see.” Data quickly moved himself out of the awkward position and stepped onto the deck. He immediately fell forward.

“Whoa!” Geordie called and moved to his side, “That hyper spanner fried the micro-gyros in your inner ear. It should take a few seconds for them to realign.”

“Thank you, Geordie.” Data said calmly, though everyone could see his embarrassment. He stood again and held the side of the bio-bed. He looked at Riker, “I am sorry, Sir. I should have anticipated that Lore would—.”

“He fooled everyone, Data.” Geordie interjected, “We were all starting to trust him.”

Data frowned and shook his head slightly. He looked troubled, “You must understand, I do not believe that Lore was acting maliciously. He was…too emotional to be rational. He was afraid for Lt. Hall.”

No one said anything, for they had already assumed as much. It just wasn’t easy attributing noble intentions to Lore.

“Sir,” Data continued to Riker, “I believe we should set a course for Ohniaka III. Lore appeared quite convinced that was where Reed would take Lt. Hall.”

Riker nodded, “We already did. Geordie finished reassembling the dilithium chamber less than an hour ago. Lore has nearly a two hour head start.”

Data frowned, somewhat awkwardly, “Did he cause much damage when he stole one of the shuttles?”

“He didn’t steal a shuttle.” Riker deadpanned. “He stole the Captain’s yacht.”
It was amazing what the absence of human beings could do to a place. Too often, humans liked to downplay their own influence on things, pretending that they were nothing more than fleas walking the surface of the Earth’s great face. The Earth would be fine without them, virtually unchanged, or so their misanthropic instincts told them. That might certainly be true of a planet like Earth, but not Ohniaka III. The soul had left the planet.

Lore knelt down behind an outcropping of jagged rocks and looked into the distance. The trees that the Ohniaka colonists had planted were still there, only their branches were barren and their trunks rotted from the inside out. The soil beneath them was sandy and dead, supporting only a few patches of thorny bush here and there. The lush forest that the colonists had created with their painstaking efforts, their countless hours calibrating and recalibrating the massive atmospheric generators, was dead and gone. Only dried out trees and wisps of straw remained. After the massacre at the colony—the massacre he had ordered—Starfleet abandoned the planet. They had not even returned to collect their equipment.

Far in the distance, perhaps three or four miles, Lore could see the grey outline of the abandoned outpost. The plateau dropped off into a deep canon just before the main building of the outpost, but the bridge spanning the impassibly distance was still intact. In a kind of bitter irony, Lore was thankful he had not ordered the bridge destroyed eight years ago. It was a minor speck in the distance, but he could see it quite clearly. There was no visible sign of life, no landing craft or lights, but that did not mean much.

He moved around the outcropping of rocks and into the rolling thicket of shrubs. He had been covering similar ground for more than an hour, for he had landed the *Enterprise* runabout nearly ten kilometers from the outpost perimeter. Considering his many precautions, he found it unlikely that Reed would have much warning of his arrival. He had taken every precaution to mask the craft’s engine signature, but the runabout was not designed to be a stealth ship, and he had done the best he could do. He only hoped it was enough.

*Please…don’t hurt her.* The fear was crippling him. What if she was already dead, and Reed had merely intended for him to find her lifeless body? Or worse still, Reed might have no intention of revealing Anna dead or alive. She would simply disappear, along with Reed, to leave Lore in a perpetual state of unsure agony. In a kind of grotesque simpatico, Lore could imagine all of these things, for they were options he might have conjured himself…years ago.

But he knew he had to hurry. The *Enterprise* would not be far behind, and there was no telling what Reed might do once he saw his escape options closing.

The bridge that spanned the impassable canon was vacant, save the sad hulk of an abandoned land vehicle. He reached it quickly and ducked low behind the steel treads. The roof and part of the side were scarred and melted, the victim of Borg disruptor fire. He clenched the phaser rifle he had taken from the runabout firmly in hand and peered through the busted out windows of the
compound. There was no movement, but he doubted Reed would be relying on human eyes for his security. Still, he had come this far, and that could only mean one of two things. Either Reed knew he was coming and had no intention of stopping him, or he was unaware and Lore would have the element of surprise. Regardless of which, he was going forward.

The human concept of jitters, or the creeps, had never been something he understood entirely, but as he pressed through the half open door of the compound lobby he felt an overwhelming sense of dread. Almost everything, from the overturned desks to the blown out ceiling panels, lay exactly where his Borg henchmen had left them. He had watched the massacre through their eyes, taking sick satisfaction in their speed and ferocious accuracy. It made him sick now, if such a thing were possible. He forced his eyes toward the back of the lobby. He passed through a set of old fashioned swinging doors that led to the central courtyard, and from there paved walks led to the various outpost buildings. There was the gymnasium, the laboratories, the residence halls, but he was most interested in the infirmary. If Reed thought anything like he did, that was where all of this was coming to —.

“Buel—!” Andrew Connor barely completed his syllable before Lore’s hand was around his neck. In the space of a heartbeat, he had seen him hiding behind the pillar next to the double doors and spun around before the man could make his escape. Lore lifted him off the ground and squeezed. This traitorous human deserved no better than Reed.

“No! Please!” Buel Kala came running from around the side of the main laboratory. She held her arms away from her body, palms out, and stopped several yards from Lore’s position. “Please, let him go!”

Lore lifted his phaser rifle and aimed it squarely at the space between her eyes, “You helped him take her.”

Buel’s legs faltered as if they were going numb, and the way her eyes kept shifting to Connor’s reddened face was enough to give Lore pause. She raised her empty hands higher, “We…we had no choice. He would have killed us! Please, I— just let him go. He doesn’t deserve this.”

Despite himself, Lore glanced at the now barely conscious human in his grip. He had no pity for them, and yet he knew that Buel was most likely telling the truth. He looked back at her, and when he saw the honest welling of tears in her eyes, he cracked. He dropped Connor from his grip, and the man collapsed like an accordion on the stone steps. Buel flew past, almost as if Lore’s nearness was nothing to her, and hovered over Connor as he coughed and struggled to breath. She ran her fingers through his hair and supported his head in her lap. His neck was already beginning to bruise.

Lore was, for just a moment, struck by their affection, but he quickly stepped back and lifted his rifle again. “Where is she?”

Buel kept her eyes on Connor’s face as she muttered, “The infirmary. He locked her up in the infirmary.”

He spun around and darted across the courtyard at a run. Small debris crunched under his feet as he reached the narrow doorway. The door was gone, long ago ripped from its fixture, and sand had come to cover much of the hallway. The building was dark, but he could detect the low hum of a generator. The building had been refitting with power recently. There was no point in stealth now, for if Reed was there he had certainly heard the commotion in the courtyard. Lore readied his rifle and bounded into the dark toward the strip of light coming from furthest door. He knew that room, it’s every line and dimension, and now rushed forth with the fear of what he would find. It wasn’t going to be Lydia Reed in the hands of a murderous Borg, though he expected something close.
“Anna!” He pressed his back against the other side of the doorframe and pointed his rifle into the room. It was different. The scattered furniture had recently been pushed against the walls, and the remainder of the cracked windows had been completely broken out. He stepped forward, “Anna!”

A sharp gasp broke the silence, and Lore looked to his right. The door to the infirmary’s quarantine chamber was half open, and just through the crack her saw a white hand move across the floor. He flung the door open to see Anna laying on her side at the back of the tiny room. Her head lay unsupported in a dark pool of blood, and her eyelids twitched as if she could not make them open.

“No! No!” He fell forward, letting the rifle drop to the floor as he came to hover over her. He was afraid to touch her, not knowing the extent of her injuries, but she was obviously on the brink of death. He had to get her back to the runabout! “Anna, I’m sorry! Just wait….” He put his hand under her bloody head and lifted her as gently as he could. With his free hand, he fumbled in his pocket for the remote transceiver to activate the runabout transporter, but…something was wrong. As he placed her head to rest against his chest, he was sure that it was lighter than it should be. Also, he could smell the sick metallic aroma of her blood, but…nothing else. He could not smell the salt of her skin or the sunflower aroma that was always present in her hair. He felt her heartbeat, but he could not feel the movement of blood under her skin. He reached down and touched her wrist. His skin was moist, warm, but there was no pulse there. How could she have a heartbeat, and yet no pulse?

Reed sighed heavily, as if he was disappointed, and pulled a small disruptor from under his jacket. He tapped it against the glass a few times, “Oh, how easy can I make this? If I wanted to kill you, I’ve certainly made it difficult for myself. After all, you’re in there, I’m out here, and no weapons blast is going to pierce that chamber.” He laughed suddenly and pressed his hands to either side of his head, “It took me six hours after the Borg left to get out of that chamber, and that’s only because the power gave out and opened the door!”

Lore could feel his heart beginning to sink, his opportunity slipping away. He curled his lips in his best imitation of disgust, “You’re pathetic. Should I feel sorry for you? How many merchants have you killed while robbing their ships?” Lore took a few strides and dragged his fingers across
the glass in a show of carelessness. “For raw numbers, I would say we’re at least even.”

“Even?” Reed flashed his red-shot eyes at Lore like they were weapons “You think we’re even? If I kill a thousand people, a million, you and I will never, never, be even!” He slammed his disruptor against the glass until he dropped it. He stumbled back and gripped his head again, as if doing so were the only thing keeping it together. “You want even!”

“Reed! Reed!” Lore shouted suddenly, for the man launched himself across the room toward a far door. “Come back here!” He could hear the desperation in his own voice as Reed stopped at a maintenance locker near the far door. He flung the door open, reached inside, and with both hands dragged Anna’s bound form to the ground. “We’ll be even!”

“No!” Lore slammed his fists against the glass until his internal sensors told him to stop. He could see that Anna was conscious, for she immediately tried to gain her feet and run, but her hands were bound behind her back. Reed easily grabbed her hair and yanked her back against him. “It took my wife nearly four minutes to die after her throat was crushed!” Reed shouted, “Let’s see how long this one lasts.” He flung Anna against the nearest wall and circled his hands around her neck. Reed looked directly into her eyes as he started to squeeze.

Lore moved to the door and furiously slammed against it, for he had lost any sense of logic. He did not even notice the ripped and peeling bioplast on his hands and arms, nor the thick tears that had begun to stream down his face. Through the glass he could hear Anna’s boots kicking against the wall behind her. Reed had lifted her off her feet.

“I’ll kill you!” Lore bellowed, “I’m going to kill you!” Rage competed with hopelessness as each of his strikes yielded nothing on the door. Everything was slipping away. “Anna!”

Through the narrow window, Lore saw a pair of eyes watching him from the infirmary door. He stopped. Buel’s shrinking frame cowered in the doorframe. Their eyes met, and past Buel’s fear and indecision, Lore saw a frozen resolve. Buel leapt forward and threw the chamber latch.

Lore burst through the door in a blind rage, and crossed the room before Reed could react. With deadly strength, he dug his fingers into Reed’s shoulders and flung him across the room. He hit the far wall like a broken toy, and landed into the jumbled mass of overturned furniture. Lore crossed half the room, his rage pushing him to finish it, but he turned back and knelt next to Anna. She was struggling to breathe and pull herself upright. Lore quickly broke the ties binding her hands and pulled her against him. She cried fiercely, the pain of each breathe shaking her.

“Breathe slowly.” Lore instructed. He encouraged her to stop trying to stand, and eventually she leaned back against him and drew long, painful breathes. Her neck was red and turning worse with each passing minute. She turned her head in the direction where Reed had fallen, and gasped when she saw him move. He was no threat, though. Not anymore. Narok Reed lay strewn across a jumbled mass of metal rods and sharp edge furniture. A dark red circle in the center of his chest was slowly spreading, and when his chest lowered in a laboring exhale, Anna saw the jagged rod on which he had fallen. His head was turned to the side, and his glassy eyes starred in the direction of the door, as if he saw something there.

“I’m…s-sorry, Lydi.” He whispered. His words were dull and muted by the blood filling his lungs. He smiled, “You forgive me…right?”

Anna cupped her hand over her mouth and looked away.

Reed continued to smile into the distance until his eyes glazed over and his jaw went slack. He was dead.
Anna turned her face into Lore’s chest and cried, whether from relief or from the physical pain still arching through her. “It’s over….”

Lore continued to stare at Reed’s lifeless body. Although he was at last relieved, Lore felt no satisfaction. In fact, he felt strangely sad, and an idea that he had never really given much credit to came to him suddenly. “I hope he gets to see her.”

“Are you all right?” Anna whispered. Her voice was worse than before, and she was laboring harder to pull air.

Lore nodded and stood, lifting Anna with him. She struggled and fell back slightly.

“It’s…it’s getting h-harder to breathe.” She gasped, and reached for her throat.

Lore reached into his pocket for the transceiver, but as he did, a crackle of radio noise filled the room. They both looked around until they saw the shiny bit of gold a few feet away, just near Reed’s lifeless feet. It was Anna’s communicator. Lore retrieved the item and pressed it as they both walked away from the room.

“I was wondering how long you were going to take.” Lore said.

“Prepare yourselves for transport.” Came Picard’s unamused reply.

Anna dropped suddenly and her eyes rolled wildly. Her mouth was moving, but no sounds came. She could not breathe.

“Hurry!” Lore yelled, “Transport us to sickbay!”

Lore lifted her as the transporter beam came, but she had stopped moving.
Chapter 51

“It’s only a matter of time before someone else comes looking for you….”

Once again he did not know where to be. He stood in the dark of the recovery room, now empty, and looked through the small round window of the door. No one had objected to him standing in the main sickbay, but he had grown tired of being stared at. Most of all, he had grown tired of trying to read peoples’ glances.

Through the throng of moving people, he could see Anna laying on one of the main bio-beds. She had already been stabilized and sedated, and when one of the nurses had announced that she would require surgery on her trachea, he had not been surprised. It was a simple surgery, there was no threat to her life, and yet he did not feel relieved by the fact. He felt responsible.

A blur of blonde hair emerged from the main office and headed toward Anna’s bio-bed. At the last minute she halted, raised her hands as if she had forgotten something, and turned back into the office. Lore saw his chance and slipped into the room. No one saw him enter Crusher’s office.

“Is she going to be all right?” He asked. He knew the answer, for it was not a complicated matter, but still he wanted to hear Crusher say it.

Dr. Crusher sighed and responded without looking at him, “Yes. Fine.”

He recognized her tone. It was the same tone she had used against him upon their rescue from Martzy Prime. Despite his own sense of guilt, he could not help but feel that Crusher’s silent accusations were unfair. He stepped forward, “You blame me, don’t you? This never would have happened to her if it hadn’t been for me. Is that right?”

Crusher pulled a kit from the cabinet behind her desk and closed the door with a frustrated bang. “You seem to know it as well as I do, so why ask?”

“Hypocritical human.” He fumed suddenly. He had grown tired of her constant accusations, her unfair harping. He kept his voice low as he spoke, “Did you blame Data when I attacked the Enterprise eight years ago? Was it his fault? I can’t believe you are blaming me for Narok Reed’s actions!”

Crusher was perhaps one of the hand full of people who suffered no fear of Lore’s temper, and she looked squarely at him with a stern face. “I don’t blame you for what Reed did, but I do blame you for everything that’s going to happen to Lt. Hall.”

He balked. “What?”

“Doctor! We’re ready!” One of the nurses called from the main room.

“I’ll be right there!” Crusher replied. She gripped her case in both hands and turned back to Lore, “Since you think I’m so unfair because my memory is long, let me remind you that I’m not the only one. How many people have you killed, Lore? And how many of them had wives and husbands and friends? If you think Narok Reed was the only person who had a score to settle with you, I think you’re going to be very disappointed. It’s only a matter of time before someone else
comes looking for you, or you just run into them, and who’s going to be there with you to get in the line of fire?” She pushed her chair under the desk and walked toward the door, “Anna doesn’t deserve that, and you know it.”

“Yes, I do.”

Crusher narrowed her eyes at him. She did not detect the usual sarcasm, yet she was incapable of hearing sincerity in his voice. She turned and left him there.

Lore crossed to the desk and pressed the comm panel, “Lore to Data. I need to talk to you.”

TWELVE HOURS LATER

Data was walking faster than usual, and Data was not the type to break routine for no reason. Counselor Troi, who was heading the same direction already, quickened her pace when he approached.

“Data, are you all right?” She asked.

His pace faltered, but they both continued, “I am fine, Councilor. Thank you.”

“How is Lore doing? I saw him waiting outside of sickbay—.” Troi broke off. It was always a shocking feeling when Data suddenly deactivated his emotion chip. “Really, Data, what’s wrong?”

“Lore has returned to the surface. He asked me to contact him if there was any further information in regards to Lt. Hall’s surgery.”

Troi frowned. It was not like Data to side step a question. “Why would Lore return to the surface?”

They approached the rear door to the main conference room, the route usually taken to access the bridge from deck one, and Data paused once inside the dim room. “I did not ask him for a reason. The place is…significant to him.”

“Lore is not the sentimental type.” She could sense nothing from him, but that was part of the problem. Anyone who wanted to hide something from an empath would be only too happy to have Data’s emotional off-switch. She continued, “Data, we still haven’t located Buel or the human, Connor. What if they’re still down there?”

“I believe Buel Kala and Connor escaped the surface with a shuttle pod. There is a definite warp signature leaving the system.”

Troi followed him onto the bridge, not at all liking his abruptness, and took her seat.

Picard was going over some system updates on the arm display of his chair. He looked up as Data crossed the bridge, “Mr. Data, would you inform Lore that his time on the surface is up. Geordie believes he can compensate for the signal degradation on Buel and Connors escape pod. We need to leave orbit now.”

“Aye, Captain.” Data took his seat and opened his comm channel. “Enterprise to Lore. We are leaving orbit. Stand by for transport.”
There was no reply.

“Enterprise to Lore. Please respond.” Data repeated.

There were another few seconds of silence while the crew exchanged glances.

“Scan the surface.” Picard ordered.

Data conducted the appropriate scan with a swift movement of his fingers. “I am detecting his signature, Captain, in the infirmary building where we found him.”

“Picard to Lore. Respond immediately—.”

Troi gasped. The explosion was so tiny, just a spec on the massive planetary image before them, but impressive none the less. The atmosphere glowed in a tight orange ball for only a second, then shrank in a gray, dusty void.

“What the hell!” Picard exclaimed, “Magnify!”

Everyone saw what they already expected to see. The canyon bridge appeared to be the only remaining piece of the Ohniaka III outpost. The outlying buildings smoldered around a flattened epicenter, the barely recognizable smear that had been the outpost infirmary.

“Enterprise to Lore. Respond!” Data repeated. “Captain, his signal is gone.”

“Scan the surface.” Picard said, “I want to know what the hell happened.” Picard glanced at Troi briefly, but she was not looking his way. It was the silent queue that she had nothing, or at least nothing she wished to share.

Data rose suddenly from his station, “Captain, I would like join an away team to the surface.”

Picard nodded solemnly, “Number one.”

Riker rose and headed for the lift. Data followed him without saying a word.

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It seemed wrong that Anna should be the last to know, but Crusher had been adamant about letting her rest. In truth, she simply wanted to delay Anna’s pain and her own discomfort. Every physician eventually had to bear the hard duty of announcing death, but this was perhaps the first time she had ever felt that it would be inappropriate for her to do so. She did not like Lore. Everyone knew it, including Anna. Troi was kind enough to take the duty for her.

It was as Crusher had expected. True pain is often silent. It is not the hysterical wailing of holonovels, nor the gut-wrenching proclamations of Shakespeare. When Troi told her, Anna merely rolled back over on the bio-bed and buried her face under her arm. Her shoulders shook with sobs, but she made hardly a sound. Only Troi could feel the true extent of her despair, so much so that she did not stay long in the room.

It did not take long for Geordie and Data to conclude that Narok Reed had hidden a timed charge in the sub-structure of the outpost infirmary. No doubt Reed had staked his life on getting even, and would have gladly gone up in the inferno if his initial plan had gone awry. That was the general consensus before long. It was just a lucky chance that Reed was not able to set off the explosion when Lt. Hall was still on the surface, and as for Lore, well…There were plenty among the crew who considered it poetic justice, though not a one dared to say so.
TEN HOURS EARLIER

“I will not,” Data insisted, “You are making a mistake.”

“There’s no other way, Data!” Lore threw his hands up and paced the room. “She’s right. Everyone is right. It’s only a matter of time before someone else comes, and I don’t know if I will see them coming.”

“You are asking me to lie. To my superiors, and to my friends…to Lt. Hall.”

“Data,” Lore lowered his voice, it was almost pleading, “If I just disappear, no one is going to believe that you or Anna were ignorant. I don’t want anyone to use Anna to find me. I won’t let that happen. I must go, Data. Now. If I stay much longer, I won’t be able to go through with it.”

Data shook his head slowly, “You will regret this decision.”

“Was that a yes?”

“You will regret it.”

To be continued…. 

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